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The Stranger Within: *Heaven on Earth* and *The Secret River*

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Abstract

This is a practitioner writer's comparative study of two novels; *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville, and *Heaven on Earth* by Rachel Benthall. The focus is on the techniques used to depict characters of markedly different cultures to that of the writers particularly the characters and culture of indigenous people, in the context of the historical novel.. The research methods and the creative process used to develop indigenous and other characters are explored, providing a detailed critique of the creative work in terms of writerly choices of focus, narrative, imagery and voice. Both novels will be contextualised in terms of the writer's other works, with reference to 'otherness', anthropology and historical fiction generally. Overall, I shall be comparing the gains and losses resulting from the methods employed.

Heaven on Earth

A novel by
Rachel Bentham

Temana held her up when the waves grew strong in her belly, tightening, pushing the baby down. As they walked into the forest, his mouth was straight; none of his usual jokes. She could feel he was excited their first baby was coming, and maybe afraid too. Glad to see him so serious, Atea leaned against him when she stopped to pant, safe, hanging on to his big shoulders. When they were deep inside the forest, he chose a place by a mape tree with great roots where she could rest her back, then he cut ferns, making a soft nest against the smooth arc of root. Atea waited for their baby to make its way, gripped in the waves that gathered and gathered in her, pressing down towards the earth.

When a wave swelled inside, he rubbed her legs and her back, until it loosened and fell back. Then they rested, listening to the other waves of the faraway sea beyond the lagoon. She knew how it would be, she'd been at many births, and although the force of it held her fast as an eel biting, she was determined. She stroked the earth with her feet, gathering strength. The sun travelled higher over the mape tree, shaking down through the leaves, golden and green, shaking beauty all around them. He looked into her eyes, talking through the long stretch of the morning as the waves came and went, came and went. He helped when she needed to walk around, then knelt behind her as the waves came closer together inside her and the forest gathered around the sound of her panting. When the pushing grew stronger, Atea called out to Hina of the ocean.

Temana put his hands around her, holding her. She knew how it was to push out a baby – some mothers cried out, some growled and roared, while those who were many times mothers mostly put their chins to their chest in silence, absorbed inside themselves. When she pushed, she looked at her hands on the ground, her fingers pressing into earth, breathing long and slow as she pushed against the earth, against Temana. When the waves stopped, she leaned against him, feeling his chest damp against her back. How glad she was that he was with her. Now grandmother was dead, there were no other midwives nearby to help, so

she was grateful that he hadn't gone night fishing, and was there when the waters leaked onto their sleeping mat. His body held her, safe and beloved. Leaves whispered above their heads, sunlight patched the ground around them, moving across the ground as the morning became afternoon. The waves grew stronger, but she didn't cry out. When he was tattooed he hadn't cried out - she could be as brave as him.

It was a long while before Temana felt the baby's head coming. When he said it was big as a breadfruit his voice was scared. But she couldn't speak; her bones were creaking. She was under the mape tree and she could hear the sea and the seabirds crying out beyond the forest, but it was like being underwater – she could feel everything around quick and keen as fish, but she couldn't push words out of her mouth. The breadfruit was breaking her. Putting her chin to her chest, she pushed until she was afraid she'd tear open. Leaning forward onto her hands and knees, she tried to rest, but there was barely a breath for rest. Instead, there was a sound creaking, creaking, like a branch ready to break. It was leaking from her mouth, from her shoulders, from the bones inside her back. Temana knelt close behind her, so steady. As the baby came, he put his hands under there, ready – and she knew he wouldn't drop it. How many slippery fish had he held? Before the next wave began, she put her head to the ground and panted. Her arms were shaking.

When she pushed out the baby Temana gasped.

'A boy!'

His voice was a pulse of happiness.

She waited for the baby's cry but could hear only the thin whine of mosquitoes in the quiet. She struggled to turn around. Temana's face was bursting, gazing at their baby. But there was no cry. He was holding the baby on his lap. It was still and purple. The silence was wrong. Such a colour hadn't happened in any births when she was helping, but Puatea had spoken of it. Atea felt for the cord, wound around the baby's neck, and Temana helped pull it over the small crumpled face, unwinding it. Why didn't those tiny dark lips open, cry out?

‘Give him to me.’

He put the child in her arms and stumbled behind the tree for the knife.

‘Quickly,’ she called, rubbing the baby, knowing Temana was being as quick as he could. Of course he was.

Temana cut the cord, and she went on rubbing. There was no sound, not even grasshoppers chirping. The baby was smeared with white, his purple face closed like a bud. She rubbed his chest, his dangling legs. She rubbed him on the back, patting him. Puatea had showed her how to greet new babies, working with her wide calm hands, but as Atea rubbed, panic flapped at her shoulderblades. The baby didn’t splutter, didn’t move. Temana watched, squatting close beside her. Growing more and more scared, she patted and rubbed harder, but still the baby didn’t open his eyes. Why wouldn’t he open his eyes? Other new babies coughed, breathed, wrinkled up their damp red faces and yelled. Temana took the baby’s hands and squeezed them, while she rubbed his strong little body up and down, up and down. The baby was a good size, a fine wide chest and a dear flat nose – why didn’t he breathe? His lips stayed fast together. His eyes were closed in his silent, ancient face.

‘Is it always like this?’ Temana’s voice was squeezed.

‘No.’

She couldn’t say more; she was busy rubbing.

He leaned back on his heels, letting go of the hands, then he rocked forward and took hold of the baby’s foot. He put the sole to his mouth. The baby’s arms wiggled as she rubbed. After a long while watching, holding, Temana let go of the little foot and turned away. He fetched his digging stick, and began to dig a hole. It wasn’t just for the afterbirth.

Atea knew what he was doing, but she couldn’t stop. Willing the baby to breathe, she kept rubbing, rubbing, while Temana slowly gathered breadfruit leaves and lined the hole. She glanced at him as he squatted by the hole, making it snug. She was worn out, but

she couldn't stop. She had to keep trying. Soon he'd breathe, open his eyes, look at her.

Soon.

Temana had to tell her to stop.

When they put their baby in the hole, he looked crushed and dark on the bright green leaves. Gently they pressed down the earth with their hands, in silence, together.

Chapter 1

As the ship approached the reef around Tahiti, dozens of native canoes paddled alongside. Some of them contained bare breasted women waving shamelessly up at the men on the decks below. Captain Ulysses Henry stared down from the quarterdeck, fascinated. These women were why so many sailors had wanted to come on this arduous voyage.

Catcalls showered down from his crew, clustered to starboard, five deep at the rails, shoving amicably for a better view. He could hear their hunger; six months of longing pulsed through their whoops and cries. Young Brookes was dancing about behind them, all lolloping legs and arms. Two almost naked women stood up in their canoes, swaying their hips in an unmistakably lascivious fashion. Henry had almost got used to seeing naked breasts in Hawaii, if it were possible for a man to get used to such a variety of shapes and sizes. Perhaps he'd just become adept at appearing unmoved. He straightened his back and cleared his throat. If he was to keep control of his crew, he had to be seen to control himself.

Withdrawing his gaze, he nodded to his First Lieutenant, Roberts. First they had to get safely into harbour, and Pape'ete had a narrow entrance between treacherous rocks. Native men in the outrigger canoes were gesturing and pointing, but Roberts was not to be distracted. They'd given the order to trim the sails, so the ship was approaching the reef at less than two knots. Roberts' shoulders were rigid, his neck at an awkward angle, as if he were pretending there were no women down there whatsoever. No golden skin, no temptation to sin.

'That display's probably not something you'll mention to Emily in your next letter...' Captain Henry inclined his head towards the breasts, hips and wet flesh, gazing ahead. 'Slow and steady as she goes.'

The narrow passage through the reef was notorious.

‘Yes, Sir,’ Roberts nodded. ‘That might prove a little unsettling for her...’

They’d been at sea together so long that sometimes speaking seemed a formality. Roberts knew most of the orders Captain Henry was about to give almost as soon as he’d thought them himself. It was obvious where they needed to go; a dark blue channel indicated the deepest passage. The break in the reef was opposite the main settlement - Pape’ete. They had the beam wind they needed to get through. Henry ordered a cutter to go ahead and check the passage while they prepared themselves. He chose Bosun Scott to look out from the crow’s nest; although it was always worrying watching him get up there with his gammy leg, he was known for his keen eyesight.

Ignoring the lively encouragement from the native canoes alongside, Henry watched Bosun Scott climbing up to the crow’s nest. The leadsman swung the lead ahead, and hauled it up.

‘By the mark, five,’ he sang out as he checked the line.

His voice carried clearly as the Tahitians in the surrounding canoes quietened down. They must realise how perilous the manoeuvre could be for a ship with a hull so much deeper than their outrigger canoes, thought Henry, appreciating their concern. Five fathoms was good enough. The men in the cutter gave the signal, and Henry and Roberts exchanged glances.

‘Steady as you go –’

Huge Pacific breakers crashed onto the rocks beside them, splashing spume across the decks. The men had stopped their caterwauling. All were silent. Black coral boulders lay perilously close to starboard as the ship slid between the two curving arms of the reef. Henry realised he was biting his tongue between his teeth, alert for the sound of rocks grating at the hull.

A point to port, and they were almost through.

Slowly, the Salamander eased through the passage – she was a difficult ship to handle. They couldn’t sail halfway around the world to founder at their destination. He and Roberts peered ahead in silence, glancing from the leadsman up to Bosun Scott, but no

warning cries came. In the quiet between the crashing waves on the rocks to either side, the masts creaked.

Slowly, slowly, the rocks drew level with the quarterdeck, then slid past towards the heads, then aft, until at last the harbour opened out before them.

‘Hurrah!’

Henry clapped Roberts on the back, both of them grinning with relief. Safe harbour. As they slipped into the smooth lagoon, the Prussian blue of the open sea lightened to an extraordinary turquoise. The colours spread before them were as bright as a child’s painting, a fantasy of emerald crags arranged around the brilliant lagoon. Henry itched for his paintbox, to soak this blue across the paper, the same blue as Grace’s eyes. Henry pushed his hands through his hair. Why was he thinking of her, so far away?

There were only two other ships at anchor, both frigates, flying the French flag. Dozens more canoes paddled towards them. As they gazed around the harbour, the sound of cannon burst across the water. One Tahitian boy leapt from his boat, almost slipping on the edge, making a show of arcing into the sparkling waves. Some of the Tahitians put their hands over their ears, while his own men stood to attention as the rumble filled the harbour. Henry’s spaniel Favour crouched at his feet. Gun salutes always scared her, but the grandeur of the sound shaking his chest gave Henry as much pleasure as it had when he was a boy in Portsmouth. Waves of sound rolled across the harbour, up against the steep mountains, then echoed back across the lagoon. At thirty three he was still thrilled, although now he restricted his response to bouncing on the balls of his feet. As the gun salute died away, the Tahitian boy surfaced at starboard, spluttering and laughing. He scrambled back into a canoe and leapt about in the prow, holding his ears, shaking his hair, as if dancing the excitement of cannon fire.

Lieutenant Roberts remained at attention, his chest pushed out, his amiable face all smiles. ‘Journey’s end, Sir.’

They’d sailed some of the wildest seas in the world, with most of their men still alive, and the ship intact – no small achievement.

Henry nodded. 'We haven't done too badly.'

He prided himself on the low death rate under his command. Only nine had died, and six of those of fever. Some were suffering with scurvy, but they'd soon recover given some fresh food. The lure of Tahiti had kept morale buoyant during most of their voyage – every sailor on board was longing for the paradise depicted in the pamphlets circulating the London docks. He'd seen a few copies on board; dog eared and grimy prints of women wearing garlands of flowers and little else. Sometimes a Captain had to know when to turn a blind eye.

Henry pointed to a patch of darker water.

'We'll anchor there – not too close to the French, but too far to swim to shore. Bring her to.'

Most sailors couldn't swim, but there were a few who could manage a short distance, and might try, given the potential rewards. The two French ships anchored nearby looked settled; sails furled, pennants streaming in the breeze. Dozens of frigate birds wheeled above the harbour that now contained three ships and a multitude of canoes.

'Luff up.'

They gazed at the verdant mountains as the ship turned into the wind, taking great breaths of air, savouring the scent of land. As they dropped anchor, the men at the capstan sang *Leave her, Johnny, leave her* with more gusto than Henry had ever heard it. He and Roberts exchanged glances as the final verse rang out. *Oh, Capen, now ye are gonna lose yer crew, Leave her, Johnny, Leave her! We've had enough of the ship, the grub an you. An it's time for us to leave her!* Wild cheers broke out below, while Henry raised an eyebrow at Roberts – they'd had long discussions on how to prevent desertion.

Half naked women stood up in many of the canoes, gesturing to the men to join them before they leapt into the lagoon now surrounding the Salamander. Smooth as porpoises, they rolled in the water as if it were their natural element. Their bodies made the waves look delicious. In his fifteen years at sea, Captain Henry hadn't yet considered the ocean delicious, but suddenly nothing was more appealing than a celebratory dive into the

bliss of cool, emerging among those carefree bodies. He'd not felt this urge to strip off his uniform and plunge into the waves as if they might be joy itself.

But he held himself still, absorbed in watching. Such glory! He'd never even seen Grace without her clothes. Often enough he'd encountered whores calling out to him at the dockside, showing far too much bosom and grimy ankle, women shoved up against walls with a sailor grunting into a flurry of skirts, but he'd never witnessed this powerful, flagrant delight in the body. Two more women swung back into their boats, their men calling out – could that be encouragement? Throwing back the wet ropes of their hair, they stood making unmistakably lewd motions, their hands sliding on their thighs. Shock ran through him. What man could fail to be moved? A memory of Grace leaning over the stone wall by the bridge took him by surprise. He'd leaned against her, the length of his torso warm against hers. It was fifteen years ago, but he remembered her softening, moulding against him. It was mesmerising. Holding her waist, he'd pushed his face into the scent of her hair. Grace had turned her mouth to his, and kissed him.

His crew were still baying from the lower decks. The women laughed below them in their boats, shaking their hands, their hips, their bare breasts at the howling men. Apparently enjoying the display, the men sat watching, grinning, paddles uplifted in their hands, even gesticulating as if encouraging their wantons. His own men jostled at the rails, whooping and growling like beasts of the field. Pray God none of them actually leapt over. Henry watched in admiration as a well built young woman hoisted her ample curves back into her canoe and stood shining like a goddess, shaking water from her hair. Slowly, she placed her hands on her hips and moved them forward. An almighty roar went up from the deck below.

Men and women like to fuck.

Men and women like to fuck. It had struck him like lightning. Henry was transported back to the drawing room at home, his father, the Admiral, drooling in his chair. The old man said it quite clearly, as if it were a piece of useful advice from father to son.

‘Men *and* women like to fuck. Yes, even her, there; she’ll bend over the bed if there’s time before dinner –‘

He’d nodded at Henry’s mother, whose cheeks blazed as suddenly as if she’d been slapped. Her eyes were icy. Henry remembered how he’d grabbed the cloth they used to wipe his father’s chin, and held it over the Admiral’s mouth, muffling the rest of his father’s observations as his mother dropped her tapestry silks and left the room. For a moment, he and his twin sister Elizabeth stood aghast; staring at each other in horror before she, too, hurried out. At eighteen, he’d been considered man enough to deal with his father. He remembered the taste of his own disgust as he helped the old man to his feet, his pronouncements continuing as Henry steered him upstairs.

‘It’s the same in every port, boy, women *like to fuck* – they may pretend they don’t, but they do –‘

The sirens below called out. The men needed to be kept occupied; he couldn’t let this go on. Henry turned to his First Lieutenant.

‘Roberts, trade some of the trinkets in the hold for that fruit - but don’t allow any natives aboard. Lower baskets over the side. I don’t want women on board, and those men look... unpredictable.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Roberts looked down at the canoes. ‘Impressive build; they look even taller than the Hawaiians – and those tattoos look fierce.’

‘I’d imagine that’s the intention.’

Roberts gave the orders.

In spite of their dazzling smiles, Henry didn’t want them on his ship – not yet. The men were broad chested, well muscled, with a remarkable quantity of teeth. He and Roberts tried to ignore the antics of the women as they watched half a dozen canoes manoeuvre to reach the baskets being lowered on ropes. Even from above, the Tahitian men looked huge, at least six feet tall – they’d dwarf most of Henry’s men. Plumes of leaves nodding in their hair added to their stature, while their tattooed faces grinned like masks.

‘As soon as we’re shipshape, detail a working party to go ashore and fetch fresh water,’ ordered Henry. ‘Choose the steadiest, but send marines with them just in case they’re tempted... All hands left on board can make a start on washing the bedding. I’ll take Thomas and Calkin with me – you stay here.’

‘Aye aye Sir. Who will you visit first?’

‘I’ll send a note to the Governor and arrange a proper meeting, but pay a visit to the British Consul first, just to make my priorities clear.’

‘Perhaps you’ll get a chance to practise your Tahitian.’ They’d spent many evenings learning and practising missionary vocabularies. It was Grace who’d helped him with languages – they used to speak Latin and Greek together, their private world that his mother and sisters couldn’t understand.

Henry smiled, excited to be there at last.

‘Haeve tatou.’ He believed it meant ‘let’s go!’

Chapter 2

Captain Henry went in the launch with Lieutenant Thomas, Midshipman Calkin, and two marines rowing the short distance across the harbour to Pape'ete. The young officers were obviously excited, despite their efforts to appear calm. Thomas tapped his feet on the hull until Henry turned his gaze on the offending boat. Several old Tahitian men stood watching on the beach as the launch approached. Calkin jumped out and towed the boat onto the sand as they reached the shallows. There was the faint, but delicious smell of woodsmoke. Land at last. Two of the old men stepped forward to help, wading into the surf, dragging the launch up onto the beach as if far younger than they appeared.

‘Ia orana. Maururu.’

When Henry spoke in Tahitian their faces lit up.

‘Ia orana, tapitane,’ they chorused.

Henry recognised ‘tapitane’ as the Tahitian pronunciation of ‘captain’ – he’d read it in Captain Cook’s records, and he experienced a fillip of pleasure to be addressed in the same way as the illustrious explorer. He asked the two men to look after the launch, which they agreed to do, adding welcomes and questions about their journey. Henry listened, struck by the graciousness of their demeanour, while he answered them in a slow, stumbling way that made him feel as inept as a child. The two introduced themselves as Herenui and Nunui. Both were at least six inches taller than Henry and his men. Their faces were ridged with raised, curling tattoos that emphasised the curves of their cheeks. Joint aromas of coconut oil and fish emanated from them as they drew closer, smiling. They congratulated Captain Henry and his men on being English, and pointed out the place where the English Consul lived, as well as the French Governor’s house.

As they walked away, Midshipman Calkin commented that he’d never seen men in such fetching skirts.

‘And did you see the boots?’ Thomas sniggered. ‘Boots but no breeches –’

‘Their wraps are called pareos, Calkin,’ Henry cut in, ‘and when did you last clean your boots, Lieutenant Thomas?’ He eyed his Lieutenant’s cracked and dusty footwear, as well as the sweat already staining his collar. ‘We must be quite a sight ourselves. Stand up straight, man.’

Thomas pressed his lips and his heels together, gazing straight ahead. The Tahitians watched as the sailors walked away. Once out of earshot, Henry remonstrated with his officers.

‘I’ll have no mocking of natives. I imagine either of those two would be more than a fair match for you in battle. Don’t underestimate them. Officers should observe and strategise, not snipe.’

Pape’ete lay along the harbour side; a straggle of shambolic buildings. They explored what there was of a settlement at a leisurely pace – Henry didn’t want to arrive at the Consul’s house appearing hot and dusty, but he did want to get his bearings. The village was little more than a scatter of huts beside a few larger European buildings; stores, lodging houses and an attempt at two storeys adorned with a cracked and weathered sign declaring it an ‘Hotel’. The whole place had a ramshackle air. Flies gathered on their damp skin as they strolled around in the powerful sunlight, taking in the dispirited atmosphere. Abandoned thatched huts were slowly collapsing between newer dwellings. The empty huts reminded Henry of the epidemics reported by Cook – had their occupants all died? Or been killed by the French? Most of the people they saw were native women, children, or elderly men. His midshipmens’ jaws dropped when several young women walked past with their breasts uncovered, pareos wrapped casually around their hips. The girls giggled as they sauntered by, their eyes more joyful than brazen. Contemplating his officers’ flushed cheeks, Henry was glad that most of the women in Pape’ete wore baggy missionary dresses that covered them from wrist to ankle in cheap stripes.

The French garrison and the Governor’s residence were a short distance uphill from the main settlement. Henry sent Thomas and Calkin up with a note for the Governor. Although it seemed safe enough, it was best they stayed together while he called on the

Consul, a Mr Miller. He found the Consul's house quickly – there weren't many to choose from. The modest wooden building was opposite another thrown together dwelling that could generously be called a house. Mr Miller and his wife seemed excited to see their visitor, kindly proffering tea and coconut cakes as they kept up a stream of chatter. They established that they were from Lincolnshire, that there was no Mrs Henry, and that they'd been in Tahiti for fourteen apparently long months. Henry sat in their best stained, dilapidated chair, while Miller perched beside him on a wooden stool.

'You must always be on your guard! There are plenty of entrepreneurs and rascals hereabouts,' declared Mrs Miller, arranging teaspoons on saucers with loving care. Her mobcap drooped with yellowed lace, and her pink dress darkened towards the hem, as if it had sucked up the rusty colour of the sandy island soil. She put Henry in mind of an exhausted prawn. Her attention to the small silver spoons made Henry wonder how much she missed her former life. He had to admire her doggedness in circumstances that were clearly trying.

'Have you called on Governor Bruat yet?' Mr Miller mopped at his forehead with a handkerchief incapable of absorbing any more moisture.

'I wanted to call on you before him.' Henry replied. 'As the British Consul, you are my first priority, and of course I hoped you could inform me on any local developments. Any information I had in Hawaii may be out of date.'

Mr Miller rocked his chair in apparent gratification. His chair had one straight, makeshift leg nailed to its frame – a leg that didn't match the others. Henry wondered how the Millers had come to be in Tahiti. They didn't seem quite the usual diplomatic class, but these out of the way places fraught with danger were hardly likely to attract comfortable aristocrats.

'The French are slippery - don't trust the Governor, he's scheming to set himself up nicely here, I believe he's fixed on divide and rule for the chiefs that are left. The English here just carry on their business as best they can...'

As the Consul spoke, Henry looked at everything but his wobbly chair; his red face, their nailed up prints of dogs and horses, the worn rug. Their glassless window looked out over a dusty yard occupied by a mare with painfully visible ribs.

‘How many of our compatriots live here?’

‘Not many; about fifty of us in Pape’ete and perhaps a couple of dozen scattered across the island, around the shore.’

‘We are very precarious here,’ Mrs Miller added quietly.

Henry nodded sympathetically. His own position felt precarious too – if the government negotiated British dominion in Tahiti, he’d have to take over the military leadership, and the odds looked challenging, to say the least. Supporting the native resistance was a dangerous gambit if he then had to assume power himself. Otherwise, he was here as a symbolic presence, with little opportunity for advancing his career when he had his hopes set on an Admiralty, at least.

‘Why, only the other day, a live paxhian mortar landed in an Englishman’s house, a Mr Collinge, so of course he came to me to complain of it -‘

Mrs Miller handed Henry a cup of tea. ‘A terrible business. My husband took it to the Governor right away of course -‘

Henry stopped himself from smiling at the notion of Miller toiling up the hill with an explosive clamped under his arm.

‘An outrage upon a Briton’s home!’ Miller slapped the arm of his chair. ‘Of course I took it up with the Governor, whereupon Bruat - would you believe - sent his gendarmes to arrest poor Mr Collinge - for possession of French property!’

‘How dreadful...’ Henry frowned. Clearly the few British residents were at the mercy of the French occupying forces – and probably vulnerable to the Tahitian rebels too, if the French were so cynical about their safety.

‘Collinge was several days imprisoned in the garrison before I secured his release - by lengthy negotiation. That Bruat had me sitting in his hallway for hours.’

‘I’m so glad you did.’ Henry sipped his tea in surprise; it was made with coco milk.

‘Secure his release, I mean.’

‘Quite so. I hope you fare better with the Governor than we have; he seems to enjoy toying with us, doesn’t he dear?’

Mrs Miller nodded her mobcap. ‘Do you have any news regarding our position? Perhaps we’ll be going home soon?’

She looked eager to hear such news.

Henry bowed towards her. ‘I’m sorry to disappoint you, but my understanding is that I am to stay here at least a year, so that doesn’t indicate a swift conclusion is expected. When I left, the two governments were still in negotiation over whether we or the French will be the final protectors of these isles. There was no further news when we called at Hawaii - but I’ll stay until it’s decided.’

Miller nodded. ‘We’re determined to remain until we hear otherwise, whatever those Oui-ouis do. We’ll see it out.’

He looked more determined than his crestfallen wife.

Mrs Miller patted her husband’s shoulder. ‘That’s what the natives call the French – Oui-ouis. It sounds childish, I know, but we’ve rather taken to it. There’s not much here to make you laugh.’

‘Then you must come on board for dinner, and a game of cards or some such. I can’t guarantee laughter, but perhaps a visit would be a small diversion. And if there’s any hint of danger, both of you will be welcome to take shelter on the Salamander. As far as the French should understand it, I’m here as a watchful presence. My ship will provide a reminder of British military might.’

‘Thank you kindly, Captain. We’ll take you up on that, as soon as you’re settled. And is there any more to your mission?’ Miller twinkled as if this were a particularly wily question.

Henry understood the implication – he might have other aims alongside the obvious ones. He couldn’t provide them with guns, but if the islanders had any chance against the

French, he'd been instructed to support them surreptitiously, if possible. However, he didn't know how trustworthy the Millers might be.

'My role is diplomatic in the first instance; I shall be visiting the Tahitian chiefs and those in other islands as a matter of duty, of course. How are the rebels faring against the French?'

'Mostly it's quiet enough – the men living in the camp - Fattoo-what's-it-called - up in the hills there, they make night raids now and then. The French see 'em off quick enough if they make forays down here – but I understand it's quite a fortress up there. Still, they must be getting hungry for their fish and po'ee. The Governor's trying to starve them out, but the women hereabouts are always going for 'picnics' in the forest...with great baskets of food. Enough to feed an army, you might say... We think they'll hold out for a while, don't we, dear?'

Mrs Miller proffered a plate of coconut cakes as she replied. 'Those women aren't going to let their men starve, and there's always breadfruit, as well as plenty of pigs for the hunting in the forest, and something called vi that they love, though I'm none too fond of it myself.'

'So the rebels can support themselves for a while at least – do you have any idea how many are up in the mountains?'

'The woman who does our washing says there's a thousand – but actually, I'm not sure if she can count, or if she's even been up to the camp – she certainly loses count of our stockings.'

'Perhaps I'll go myself, when it will be least noticed...' A thousand seemed like a lot, but Cook had listed tens of thousands of natives in Tahiti. Henry leaned back gingerly in his creaking chair, enjoying the sweetness of the cake melting on his tongue. 'And how many, er, Oui-ouis in the garrison?'

'At least two hundred, and more on the ships. And they have arms, of course. They're well supplied up there, they even have their own kitchen garden...'

A few hundred against a thousand didn't sound too promising. Henry could see why the French 'Protectorate' was taking so long to establish.

'Have there been any recent battles?'

'Battles? Not really.' Miller looked thoughtful. 'The rebels come down at night. There's never a chance of a set battle; I don't think they'd be so stupid. Guns aren't much use in the forests, or in the dark, and that's when they tend to make their forays down here. No amount of barricades and curfews make any difference.'

Of course, Henry thought, the islanders were experienced warriors. Of course they'd use their own geography to their advantage.

'And what of the illustrious Tahitian Queen? Is there any chance of her leading the resistance?'

She'd inherited her position from her father, who had been more kingly than she was queenlike, apparently. Long before the French had come to Tahiti, the British had established an association between the Tahitian sovereign and their own, but this had been conveniently ignored by the French.

Miller shook his head, his mouth downturned. 'I don't believe there's any hope there. Queen Pomare has taken the Governor's frigate and gone into exile on Moorea. She seems much more interested in her young man than fighting, as far as we can tell. Pomaritari, they call him. A vain little blighter.'

'She is a sort,' added Mrs Miller. 'A woman should have more dignity. He's handsome enough - by their lights, of course - in fact, quite a dandy - but he's none too bright, and they seem to quarrel quite a bit. I've seen her actually kick him. In public. In the nether regions!' Mrs Miller flushed with her own daring.

Miller inclined his head in agreement. 'She's not a person you can rely on; that's my assessment.'

'I'll visit her as soon as I can; see how the land lies.' Henry looked forward to finding out for himself, wondering if his own conclusions would be similar. 'Delicious cakes, Mrs Miller. It's been weeks since I tasted anything so good. We ran out of sugar some

time ago.’ He wondered where Calkin and Thomas had got to – they’d probably appreciate a cake or two. He hoped they hadn’t got into any difficulty; surely delivering a note was straightforward enough.

Mrs Miller smiled. ‘You may tire of coconut after a few months, Captain.’

‘Very wise, Captain. Yes, visit the Queen. She’s over there in Moorea with her cronies. Lugubrious – or plain lazy; that’s what I’d call her. Always too relaxed to make an effort in any direction...’ Miller broke off half a cake and popped it into his mouth while he ruminated. ‘The islanders aren’t much above savages, for the most part,’ Miller answered, crumbs escaping onto his waistcoat as he spoke. He managed to both chew and speak, but it wasn’t an uplifting sight. ‘The rebels have guns, but not many. They’re used to fighting, and you can’t deny their bravery in combat, but sooner or later they’ll have to admit defeat. Civilisation will prevail of course, though your guess is as good as mine if it’s to be us or the French.’

As he brushed the scatter of crumbs from his chest, Henry wondered about the circles in which the Millers had moved in at home. Miller was as rough and ready as many naval officers – Cook himself had been of humble stock. And the ‘savages’ he’d met so far had seemed gracious and friendly.

‘Tahitians are savages alright,’ Mrs Miller added. ‘But they seem to like us better than the French. I show them pictures of our Queen – so young, so pretty.’ She pointed to a print of Queen Victoria nailed to the wall between their two glassless windows. ‘They never fail to tell me they’d rather us than the French.’

Henry smiled. ‘I wonder if they tell the French something similar? I’m sure you know better than I, but Captain Cook noted a Tahitian tendency to say what they thought their listener wanted to hear.’

‘That’s as may be. Who can tell what they’re really thinking?’ Mrs Miller put down her cakes, and sat down at last, drawing her chair closer to Henry’s. ‘But, Captain, there are things that would make your hair curl. Thank God for the missionaries, I say. There are

goings-on you wouldn't believe – ‘ She dropped her voice. ‘ Almost every one of them a murderer – men and women both – you'll find out soon enough –‘

Murder? Henry leaned forward, interested, but the Consul cut his wife short.

‘I'm sure the Captain doesn't want to hear about all that today, dear. Let's not burden him with it now.’

Drawing her feet in under her skirts, Mrs Miller sniffed. ‘Suffice to say, they're savages at heart. All they want is their pleasures. Personally, I find it hard even to talk to them sometimes, when I think about it –‘

Miller leaned over and patted her hand. ‘It's hard for the ladies here. I'm sure the captain will find out for himself soon enough.’

It must be hard for a woman to contemplate all the nakedness and blatant joyfulness, especially when trussed up in sweaty corsets herself, thought Henry. Mrs Miller obviously was not enamoured of her life here. He watched her pat her brow with a lace-trimmed handkerchief as Miller continued to talk. It wasn't long before Calkin and Thomas arrived with a note from the French Governor inviting Captain Henry to call for luncheon the following day. They polished off the remaining cakes with alacrity. As they left, Henry invited the Millers to dine on board in a few days. He strolled back to the launch with his midshipmen, enjoying the air, wondering what it was that upset Mrs Miller so particularly. No doubt he would find out. Thomas was talking about pigs, and the cleverness of Captain Cook in leaving them on the island for future supplies. Both of them were looking forward to a good dinner; fresh pork was more than welcome after weeks of salt meat and fish.

But as the launch was winched up the side of the Salamander, Henry could feel something was amiss. The atmosphere on board was oddly charged. Seaman Marshall's eyes avoided his as he climbed on board. Several other sailors gave him sidelong glances as they secured the launch. The ship seemed unusually quiet.

Chapter 3

The sun was getting lower; the day was cooling down. Atea and her daughter Hauata walked together along the shore, looking up at the mountains cloaked in mist. Sorrow rained down in fine drops that clung to her skin and seeped all through her; dampening, quietening.

Hauata was leaving Tahiti, going to stay with her father's people. It was the first sea journey Hauata had made without her mother or father. Worse than that was the reason she was going, but it was her choice. Atea's sadness sank into each footprint on the sand.

The smell of cooking fish drifted across from the huts at Pape'ete as they came into the broad bay. Smoke twisted up from fires outside the huts – she could tell who was cooking from the fires. If Temana didn't come maybe she'd eat alone later. There'd been many evenings when she and Hauata sat together, waiting for him. Atea hugged the roll of mats in her arms, presents for Temana's people. She wanted to hold on to something. Hauata was too old to want to hold hands.

'Tell Nanihi I hope she's well, and that I remember her. She looked after your father like a mother, and he always talks of her with love. Tell her that – remember to say good things about him.'

'Don't worry, I'm going to help her,' said Hauata. 'I've thought about it already. I'll get wood for her fire, and sweep out her hut every day.'

'Ask her what she wants you to do first – don't offend her by taking her tasks away. Maybe you could look for vi in the forest, in places where it's too far.'

'I can dig arrowroot, too.'

'Yes, you're getting big and strong,' Atea smiled at her daughter. Was she avoiding talking about her father? Atea took hold of her hand, wondering if she'd talk with Nanihi. 'I know you'll be kind. If you watch carefully, you'll see where she needs your help.'

Atea scanned the bay. A new ship was resting a short distance from the French ships. All that cannon fire the day before – the popa'a liked to make a noise to show they'd

arrived. There was Herenui's canoe waiting, with people gathered nearby. Herenui was beside it, but where was Temana? A father should say goodbye to his daughter - but maybe not if he's drunk. The bay spread out before them, the lagoon sparkling and wriggling all the way out to the reef. The sun was sinking down towards the pink clouds over Moorea; tall peaks broke the sunlight into long golden arms that reached out towards Tahiti. Hauata would sail around Moorea in the canoe, on and on, into the night. Atea touched the boat, pleased to see high clouds, and feel a fresh wind blowing. It could be several days sailing to Raiatea, depending on the winds. The birds flying out over the reef were a good sign.

Hauata's friends rushed towards them, pulling Hauata aside to see the garland they'd made. Palm spikes and tiare flowers. Tapoa, Miri's son, carried it aloft, his face lit with pride. They wanted to make a ceremony to put the garland on her head. Atea walked on; they might be awkward if she stood and watched. Her spirits lifted a little as she recognized Miri coming towards her.

'Ia orana.'

They embraced and looked at each other. Miri had always been there, long before Temana came. She knew Atea's sadness; there was no need to speak it.

'Ia orana. We could sit over there while Hauata is saying goodbye.'

They sat down near a scattering of stones. It was where the gods were burned when they were girls, the stones still marking out the circle of the fire. They watched Hauata and her friends talking with solemn faces, as if they were chiefs. Tapoa reached up to place the garland on Hauata's hair. She was a head taller than him now. The clouds above Moorea flushed deeper red, the canoe lay on the sand, its outrigger like an outstretched elbow. Every now and then, Miri and Atea cast their eyes along the shore, looking for a tall figure, broad shouldered, quick footed. There was no sign of Temana. Herenui was the only man in sight. Frigate birds cried out in the distance.

'You could go too,' said Miri. 'I have more breadfruit, cooked and wrapped, enough for the journey.'

Atea glanced at the empty canoe. ‘Don’t make it harder. You know I don’t want her to go alone. Herenui will be looking after her on the journey, and I know she’ll be safe, but when she’s there, when he leaves and she’s left behind...’ Atea remembered bringing Hauata back from the forest the day she was born, the happiness of holding a baby she could keep, snuffling against her. She looked back at Hauata with her friends close around her. ‘I’ll miss her. We haven’t been apart – not for one day since her birth ...’

‘Then go with her!’

Atea sat up straighter. ‘She’s old enough to choose, and she’s choosing to go. I’m not.’ Her heart squeezed in her chest as she spoke. ‘But I’m not going to roll up her sleeping mat – I’ll leave it out, talk with him, make him see. I’ll be more patient, more kind – and soon – when he’s better, she can come back.’

‘When will he be better?’

Atea didn’t answer. Miri carried on.

‘He won’t stop. Why should he?’

‘He has a sickness,’ Atea replied, ‘he’ll get better.’ She bent her head lower, watching her own fingers.

‘Then gather the family and try to make him better. We could do ho’oponopono with him.’

‘He won’t agree - he says there’s nothing wrong with him – it’s the Oui-oui drink. Now she’s going he says he’ll make his own drink with crab and coconut, and drink cava at ceremonies, nothing else. He’s promised he’ll stop drinking with them.’

Miri’s eyebrows were raised. ‘Let’s see how long. Maybe you’ve heard too much Oui-oui talk too. A woman doesn’t stay with a man who makes her unhappy. Maybe for a few days, a few weeks, but not for as long as you have. I’m afraid for you. How can Hauata be happy if you don’t look after your own happiness?’

Atea’s hands were sweating. She and Temana had been together so long. She thought of the pouara buried in their hut; her babies, their babies.

‘He says Oui-oui women don’t leave their husbands. He’s afraid I’ll leave –’ Atea pushed her feet against one of the rocks. ‘He gets blown about – but he’ll see how steady I can be. I won’t leave. I can be like those Oui-oui women. Then he’ll get well again.’

‘You don’t know that. He’s been drinking with them too long. He’s eaten up their ideas and they make him sick. Stupid man.’ With her foot, Miri pushed against another big stone half buried in the sand. Her toes gripped its surface. ‘Do you remember when they burned the gods?’

Of course she remembered. The ashes of the gods were mixed in with the sand where they sat. ‘You wanted Taaroa to gobble up the Pastor with his big red mouth. I was so scared - but I wanted to see Pastor Coe’s legs kicking out of his mouth.’ Atea smiled, but she remembered their terror. ‘The popa’a god was more powerful. They were right.’

Miri’s dark eyebrows drew together. ‘They have more mana, more power, but bad things happen. We wear their clothes and sing at church, but the sicknesses haven’t stopped. And now men crawl into the huts at night, women eat turtle meat and...so many things happen... like Temana. They say their women stay with them, but where are they? There aren’t any women with those soldiers who talk about what wives must do.’

Atea rubbed her heels in the sand. She had to do something, make preparations, talk to Herenui. If she went on listening to Miri she might change her mind. She got up and brushed off her pareo.

‘I’m going to the canoe.’

Miri shrugged.

Quickly, Atea walked towards the boat. Herenui was there, but after greeting her, he was quiet as she stowed her roll of mats inside. Using the mats and some bundles of barkcloth, she made a comfortable nest for Hauata to lie in. She climbed inside the canoe and pummeled the barkcloth into place. Herenui knew why Hauata had decided to leave. Everyone knew. There was no need to talk about it. Together she and Herenui packed the last water gourds and parcels of food into the hull. Young people went to live with other

families if there was difficulty in their own, there was nothing unusual in that. Hauata was a young woman now.

When Temana drank with the Oui-ouis, he came back with stories about Oui-oui women always loving and looking after their husbands. He said French wives were more virtuous, but Miri was right, it was only what the soldiers said – and they all wanted to be with Tahitian women.

Perhaps Temana wasn't going to come to say goodbye. Perhaps he was too ashamed? He knew Hauata was leaving because of him.

She met Herenui's eye. 'Are you ready?'

'Tell her to come,' he said.

As she walked along the beach to fetch Hauata, her daughter hugged her friends and began to walk down to meet her. She looked sad, but sure of herself as she left them. Her friends sat down where they were. Before Atea had a chance to say anything, Hauata started pleading.

'Come with me. Please,' she said.

Atea looked into her daughter's eyes.

'I'll come soon, to visit. As soon as I can.'

Hauata's gaze fell to the sand. She turned towards Herenui's canoe. Atea followed close behind her daughter's angry shoulders. The leaves in her garland bobbed at each step. When Hauata got to the canoe she turned around.

'He isn't coming.' She dug her toes into the sand. 'I'll be afraid for you.'

The distance between them was tight with pain.

'I'll be all right.' She didn't know what else to say. 'He loves you. I don't know what's wrong with him – but he loves you. Make sure you're good to Nanihi.' Slipping her arms around Hauata, she hugged her close. 'You're almost as big as me now. Ask her to teach you about making dyes from plants, she's good at that.'

Over Hauata's shoulder, she saw a man coming down past the palms, past the other children. He was carrying something on his shoulder. Her heart lifted - it was him; she could

tell from his easy walk. But was he drunk? He'd been gone for some time... Before she spoke, she watched his feet – and saw with relief that they were planted steadily one in front of the other, as even as paddle strokes as he walked towards them. Good.

‘Look! He’s coming now! You see – he hasn’t forgotten.’

Hauata twisted out of her mother’s arms and made her way towards her father. She didn’t run like she used to, instead she walked a little way then stood and waited. Atea stayed where she was, glad that he’d come, but wary of his mood. He was singing about the baby fishes in the sea, the song that made Hauata laugh. Sometimes he was still the way he used to be.

Hauata’s friends ran down, dancing along to his singing. As he got closer, she could see that what he had on his shoulder was a roll of missionary cloth. She wondered if it had come from the soldiers – he always thought Oui-oui things were better. What had he traded for it – fish, maybe? He stopped in front of Hauata and bowed, presenting the cloth ceremoniously.

‘For my beautiful daughter, on the occasion of her first sea journey without her loving parents – to be presented to her respected grandmother Nanihi.’ He smiled, sliding the roll of cloth down on to one end in the sand, tilting it towards Hauata. Her friends gathered around him.

‘Thank you,’ Hauata replied. Atea couldn’t see her face, but she sounded happy. Temana was good at ceremony – he could balance of seriousness and fun. Hauata touched the cloth, looking at the pattern. From where Atea stood, it looked like the flower pattern that made her eyes ache. A lot of missionary cloth was like that, busy with patterns the same all over without a rest. She wondered if the flowers in France grew like that, all turned to the sun in lines, obedient as Oui-oui wives, without the friendliness of other plants among them.

Temana was teasing.

‘Perhaps Nanihi will tear it into many pareos so that she can wear a clean one every day from the new moon to the full... and maybe she’ll let you have one too – or would you rather it was made into a missionary dress?’

‘You know I like pareos better – I can run in them. Maybe when I’m older I’ll wear a dress –’ Hauata sounded pleased.

‘Well, this cloth will be happy to be worn by one so lovely, whatever it’s made into. The flowers will be smiling on you, and you’ll be smiling in the flowers...each of you will give the other even more loveliness.’

Hauata laughed. Temana was so good at charming her that Atea couldn’t help smiling. He flipped the cloth back onto his shoulder as if it was dry driftwood, then crooked his arm like the Pastor when he and his wife went for their walks.

‘May I help you to your boat, my daughter? Perhaps you need a strong, handsome, and modest man to help you put this gift in your canoe?’

Taking his arm, Hauata giggled. Together they paraded towards the boat as if they were king and queen, her friends trotting behind. When they pushed the canoe off, Hauata was still grinning. Her friends called out and waved as Herenui paddled across the lagoon towards the break in the reef. Temana stood beside Atea, his hand warm at her side.

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After Hauata left, they walked home and cooked the fish he’d caught earlier. It was dark, and they lit the melon lamps inside their hut. The floor was swept and orderly as she liked it, the same, except for the emptiness of Hauata’s sleeping mat. Temana kept up his cheerful talk as they settled for the evening but it felt like too much. Atea sat against the doorpost, looking out to sea as he made up the fire and prepared the fish. Perhaps they could be like it used to be. Cooking, talking easily. He spoke about the shark that was her mother’s pet. On his way back from fishing, he often stopped at the place where it lived, to gut the fish he’d caught that day.

‘That old shark is going to die soon,’ he said. ‘Every time I see him, he’s swimming slower, as if he’s half asleep. Maybe he’s too slow to catch much fish now. His teeth are

probably broken and rotten. This morning he looked at me for a long while before he swam away.'

'Maybe he was wondering how you'd taste – if he's hungry ...'

Temana grinned. He'd killed his first shark when he was fifteen.

'Even if I jumped in his mouth he couldn't swallow me. I'd hold his jaws open with my fish spear while I snap off his last teeth for necklaces...' He poked the two fat fish on the fire.

'Maybe the scraps you give him are all he has.' Her words sat in the air. She was careful not to look at him as she realized what she'd said. All she had were the scraps of him after he'd been away with the soldiers. She was glad he'd come back instead of going to the Oui-ouis, but that was a scrap too, being grateful that he was with her, being glad that he wasn't drinking. It was easy to let him talk about the shark; she didn't want to talk about why Hauata had gone.

When the fish were done, they ate and talked about how Reva, Atea's mother, used to ride the shark when she was younger. She was too old now to cling on, to hold her breath so long underwater, but she used to dive down to the secret holes in the reef. Atea remembered Reva coming up on the shark's fin, clinging on, gasping, her long hair streaming behind her. When they'd finished eating, Temana leaned against the roof post where he always leaned. Atea looked at Hauata's sleeping mat. Silence fell between them. Atea went to the doorway with the gourd to rinse her mouth. Maybe she could lean against him as she used to; maybe she could try to talk some more. But she was worn out. She wanted to sleep.

She turned and looked at him. Temana patted the place where she sometimes sat resting against him. His face was serious.

'I'm sorry she's gone. Hauata.'

Atea swallowed, moved by the truth in his voice, but she didn't move, didn't answer, didn't sit down by him as he wanted. It wasn't so easy.

‘I know it’s because of me,’ he went on, ‘and I know you’ll miss her.’ He sighed. ‘It’s the drink that makes me angry. But there won’t be any more.’

She looked at him, across the floor of their hut, in the glow of the lamps. Did he mean it? They both knew what he meant. Making a fight with her. Hitting her.

‘I don’t know if it’s the drink, or if there’s something in you that comes out when you have it.’ She kept her voice steady, kept her eyes on him. Now he was calm maybe he could listen. ‘I don’t understand why you get angry. Why aren’t you angry with the Oui-ouis? I didn’t take your father away - they did.’

Atea watched his hands and his feet. Would he spring up, suddenly blazing? But he stayed calm. His hands stayed where they were, spread on his thighs.

‘You’re right.’ He stared at the ground. ‘I don’t know why ... I get angry and I want to hit someone. I don’t know why it’s you. You’re there.’

‘Hit them if they make you angry. Don’t come back here and fight with me.’

His hands folded over each other then curled into each other, a bundle of shame. ‘No. I won’t. I promise.’

‘Everyone told me to go with Hauata, but I’m staying, because I want you to get better.’ She was rushing to say it, feeling him listening at last. ‘Although I don’t want to be without her. If you don’t stop, I will go away too.’ Her heart was beating hard as she spoke. ‘Hauata wanted me to go with her.’

Temana leaned forward. ‘I know. I know - and I’m sorry... I’m sorry she’s gone too.’ He sighed. His hands were tight together. ‘I can be your man again, the way you want. I won’t play cards with the Oui-ouis again. I won’t touch their drinks. Let me show you. Please.’

It wasn’t a sudden speech. It wasn’t what he’d said before. Slowly, he raised his hands, holding them out to her as she stood in the doorway. Atea felt her heart open. The short distance across the mud floor felt like a long way as she walked towards him. She stopped by him and stood above him, his arms still stretched up towards her. He turned his face up.

‘Please,’ he said. ‘I want you to be with me.’

She put one hand in his. He wrapped his fingers around hers. His hands were powerful, but they enclosed hers tenderly. She stepped between his knees and slid down, leaning back against his chest, letting him close his arms around her. It was how they used to sit. It was how they sat when she gave birth to their babies. He was warm behind her, holding her. The relief of his touch made her want to weep. She leaned back on him.

‘Maururu,’ he said. ‘Thank you.’

Chapter 4

Whatever the problem was, Henry decided it could wait until he was washed and dressed. He went straight to his cabin. His dog Favour was waiting for him, obviously agitated; she danced a lengthy welcome as he stripped off his shirt and doused himself with cool water. It was such a relief to be able to take his uniform off and stand naked on the cool boards in front of his washstand, in the blessed privacy of his quarters. Henry loved washing. If horses sweat, men perspire and ladies gently glow, he was a prize racehorse. It didn't matter that the water was cold, in fact its chill had a special savour in this climate where the heat seemed to accumulate as the day progressed, stifling every pore, his face sweating until even his eye sockets felt smeary, and his hair fell lank over his temples. He always looked forward to sluicing away the grime.

First he soaked his washcloth, squeezed it out a little, then pressed it to the back of his neck. Ahh. The shock and the freshening of it. A thin, cool trickle traced his spine like a fingertip. Then he returned the cloth to his basin and plunged his face down to meet it, rubbing the saturated cloth up into his hair, around his neck, down his chest. Systematically, he soaped himself from top to toe with the last block of soap his younger sister Prudence had given him. The scent of violets – her favourite, not his - but soap was a precious commodity on board ship whatever the smell. As he washed, Favour pranced at his feet. Once he'd rinsed, he relished the roughness of his towel on his back and buttocks, then wrapped it around his waist like a pareo, enjoying the residual damp across his chest that enabled him to retain the freshness a little longer. Favour was still whining and dancing – what had got into her? Generally she wasn't allowed in his bed, but to calm her down he picked her up and put her on the red coverlet.

The touch of the silk reminded him of his twin, Elizabeth – she'd made the coverlet as she sat with him after Grace was sent away. As she sewed, she'd listened to his misery and his fury. She was the one who'd kept him sane through those weeks, sitting with him

daily until he was at last sent away to sea. Every day he missed her, though he would tell no-one. He glanced at the small portrait of her on his wall. They were all there; Elizabeth, Prudence, mother and father. Perhaps they'd like to hear his first impressions of the island that was to be his home for a year; he'd write to them later.

Refreshed and wearing a clean shirt, he went up on deck to find Roberts, Favour trotting at his heels. Everything seemed calm as he cast his eye around the ship. The men would all be keen to get shore leave, so he guessed they'd be careful to toe the line in the hope of being chosen first. On the mess deck the men dozed in their hammocks or played cards. Cook banged at the stove. Dinner smelt good – roast pork? The blasted chickens were on the loose again, wandering under the mess tables scavenging for scraps, but that was a minor fidget. The men looked almost studiously relaxed. Something felt wrong.

Roberts was waiting for him on the quarterdeck as he'd anticipated. Sunsets were spectacular in the South Seas; they both liked to take a moment before dinner to admire the view, wherever they were. They leaned on the rail, admiring the grandiose display of vermilion clouds ranged above the nearby island of Moorea.

'All ship shape?' Henry looked around. The decks had been holystoned, and bed linen hung on the rigging to dry, pink in the light from the setting sun.

'Right as rain, Sir. We've filled almost twenty barrels with clean water, and got fresh food besides. The natives brought plenty of fruit. As you can see, the men have been busy with the washboards.'

'Good. You know I can't abide vermin.'

'Yes sir. And cook's been trying out ways to prepare those ugly lumps they call breadfruit. How can a fruit taste so much like toast? Most odd.' Roberts was clearly in a good mood. 'Got some wild pigs though – I'm happy to say it's pork this evening. How was your visit?'

'I thought the Tahitians pretty stoic, considering their situation – the ones we saw were mostly old men and younger women. Pragmatic, perhaps a touch dispirited. Most of the able men are in the rebel camp, apparently. A surprising number – about a thousand of

them, according to the Consul. I tried out a few greetings here and there; our language studies were much appreciated.'

'A thousand!' Roberts looked impressed. 'How was the Consul?'

'A little rough around the edges. I suppose this kind of posting is unlikely to attract anyone used to a life of ease. They were very hospitable; Mrs Miller makes excellent coconut cakes. She seemed to be trying her best, but she put me in mind of an exhausted prawn... uncharitable, I know -'

Henry was interrupted by a laugh ringing out across the water, melodious and sensual. It carried clearly in the still evening air. Henry frowned. 'That sounded remarkably like a woman.'

Roberts flushed. 'I don't see how...I assure you there aren't any on board -'

Another laugh rang out. There was no mistaking it.

'But I'd have noticed, Sir -' Roberts rubbed his chin in consternation. 'I watched every boat -'

Henry was already making his way down the steps to the mess deck, Roberts following close behind. Several men leapt to their feet as their captain marched through. Their faces betrayed a mixture of knowledge and shame.

'Where are they?' Captain Henry shouted.

The men dropped their eyes. Below. The lower decks. Henry and Roberts climbed down towards the hold, stooping under the low ceilings of the orlop deck in the dim light, while Favour ran ahead. The encouraging murmurs of women oozed out from behind the water barrels. The sound of pleasure. It hit Henry in the solar plexus; the sound of Grace. That low moaning.

Henry and Roberts squeezed between two stacks - boxes of ship's biscuit. As they appeared, silence descended on the scene. A secluded space had been made in the store area with stacks of boxes. A dishevelled sailor wearing only his shirt hurriedly withdrew from between the legs of a naked woman lying splayed on rolls of cloth. Her naked body was raised up to a convenient height. The sailor hadn't bothered to remove his breeches; they

were at half mast below his knees. Dawkins. He bent down, fumbling for them, as he shuffled back. The Tahitian woman raised herself up on her elbows to look at the intruders, apparently unabashed. Her breasts wobbled and settled as she did so. She didn't even close her legs. As Dawkins moved aside, Henry's gaze was riveted to the swollen pink.

He stood motionless, unable to stop looking. Casually, the woman brought her legs together. Her teeth shone in the gloom as she spoke. 'Ia orana.' He couldn't understand why she didn't cover her body. Her breasts gleamed with sweat. She gazed back at Henry and Roberts with astonishing calm.

To starboard, a naked girl was tipped abruptly off the lap of a sailor as he struggled to his feet. Thwaite. He concentrated on trying to fasten his trousers as if it would save him. After glancing at Henry and Roberts, the girl attempted to assist Thwaite, kneeling down to help him, but he brushed her away. As she got to her feet her glance was bemused, but there was no hint of shame. She stood looking back at Henry and Roberts with apparent interest. To Henry, she looked no older than his younger sister. Prudence would have been mortified to witness such a scene.

'Ia orana, manua. Ia orana tapitane.'

She greeted them in a voice quiet with dignity, as if nothing at all were amiss. Although young, she seemed self possessed in this humiliating situation.

'Sir, I have no idea how they came aboard,' Roberts blurted, 'I can assure you I didn't know they were here –'

Disappointed, Henry didn't even glance back at him. Of course Roberts hadn't known, but they'd got on board somehow, damn it. His heart sank; he'd have to give a tough punishment to the sailors, a severe warning. He hated floggings, but naval rules were clear.

'Fifteen lashes each,' Henry said. 'Thwaite. Dawkins.'

At the tone of his voice, Favour dropped to the floor and stayed there, ears back and eyes rolling upwards. Twenty stripes would incapacitate most men, yet some of his sailors were so hardened by years at sea they were willing to risk it. Thwaite and Dawkins were sturdy, fighting men. They didn't bother with excuses, they just stood stolidly staring. In the

silence, Henry wondered if fifteen lashes were enough. But he couldn't change his order now, not unless one of them gave him further cause. Fifteen was a strong message, yet left him room to raise the bar further. Roberts rushed into the silence.

‘Honestly, Sir, I’d have put a stop to this if I’d known -‘

‘No women on board - I made that clear.’

‘I’m so sorry, Sir - I can’t think how they got on. They must have come off the canoes that brought the fruit - someone must have thrown a ladder down -‘

Henry interrupted. ‘They can go back to their canoes. Now. March them up.’ He glared at Roberts. ‘Order the marines to search every deck. If there are any more women, the same punishment applies to each man involved. I won’t have my ship turned into a bawdy house.’

The crew scrambled to watch the women as they were taken up to the rails, where they hallooed to a canoe floating nearby. Marines surrounded them in a salacious semicircle, but under the Captain’s stony gaze every man on deck was silent. Henry was torn between disgust and admiration; the women remained unabashed, their breasts bare, their heads held high. They tied their pareos around their waists as the canoe paddled towards the ship.

Glancing at each other, they tested the rails with their broad, capable feet. Every eye was on them as they climbed over the rails and jumped without hesitation into the waves beneath.

Chapter 5

Sadness sat in her throat. Every time she spoke to Temana she felt it there, every time she stopped to greet someone she could feel it, pulling her voice down even when she tried to lift it up. After Hauata left he'd stopped drinking, for some days, but after a while he went back to visiting the Oui-oui soldiers at the garrison, coming back late. He didn't smell of drink, not yet, but she was uneasy, waiting, watching him. But he wasn't so mean as before; he was quieter, less angry. One day after Hauata left, she was asked to go with Meherio and her husband to the forest. Meherio's water begun to leak during the morning. Since Puatea died, she was the only midwife on her side of the island.

Afterwards, Atea came back to a silent hut. She was tired; it had taken most of the day. Meherio was young and needed a lot of help; it was her second child, not too willing to come out, and she'd needed long, long spaces of calm, quiet talking and touching, like the shhhh the waves make after breaking. At first Meherio was frightened, chattering and complaining until she was persuaded to settle to the work of it, putting her teeth together and pushing with the waves. Atea's thighs ached from squatting beside her for so long – from late morning until the sun went down - but Meherio was safe. The baby slithered out, a boy. His father took him before he drew breath and gave him to Taaroa. It was the first time he'd made a pouara, but he used his thumbs quickly and properly. He took the baby behind Meherio into the darkness under the trees so she didn't see. He was a kind young man. When they walked back through the shadows of the forest Meherio was silent. All three of them were silent.

The rising moon was full; looking through the doorway Atea could see their hut was empty. Hauata's sleeping mat lay flat on the ground. Temana's absence hurt like a blow. She hoped he could have gone night fishing, but she knew he was probably with the Oui-ouis. She decided to sleep rather than wait for him.

As she went in, she smelt earth. Something was wrong. Over in the corner of the hut, her own sleeping mat had been disturbed – she could see in the moonlight that it was pushed to one side, and soil was strewn about, blotching Temana’s mat. A dark hole gaped in the ground where her mat should be.

Her pouara! Falling to her knees by her mat, she groped about in the hole, scraping at the ground. Her pouara – they’d gone. Nothing but soil ran through her hands. Her fingers dredged through the sandy earth again and again, but it was no use. They were gone - all three of them.

Only he knew they were there. The pain of it made her cry aloud; she’d risked punishment from the missionaries, she’d kept them hidden in spite of the rules – and he knew how much she cherished them. If he loved her at all, he must know. Yet he’d taken them.

She pitched into the hole, pressing herself into the earth. Sand smeared her mouth as she wept, calling to her pouara, to Hina of the within, to Taaroa who had demanded her babies. After all her loving, Temana had done this. It must be him. She didn’t want to believe it, but in her belly she knew it was true. Temana had taken their pouara, their precious carvings of the babies that couldn’t live.

What had he done with them? Surely he wouldn’t trade them – not if he cared about her? He’d bring them back – he’d realise how cruel he was. His face would be sorry as he put them back into her hands. She called out to each one of them by name, promising she’d get them back. Temana would bring them back, of course he would; he had to – if he loved her. He’d done many stupid things, but he wouldn’t want to hurt her so much.

Resting in the shallow hole, Atea curled up. A sick emptiness lay in her belly. Her babies were gone. She hugged herself in misery as the darkness in the hut gathered round her. If he’d taken them, then his love must be gone too. All that they’d had between them was spoiled, all the loving and waiting for him to be better, to come back to her - it was all finished. She could have gone with Hauata. Perhaps she was wrong, and all of it was hopeless. Perhaps he wasn’t ever going to be better. The shock of it trembled in her chest.

The way they'd loved each other couldn't come back, not if he'd done this. Perhaps he'd traded them with strangers, to be handled by careless Oui-oui sailors. Just the thought of it made her curl up tighter, her forearms pressed across her belly. She'd seen how the Oui-ouis were; they didn't hold carvings with honour, they poked at their eyes, passed them from hand to hand, as if they were no more than pieces of wood. Her pouara. In the garrison with Oui-ouis? Temana couldn't have put them into such loveless hands, could he?

Moonbeams moved across the floor and faded away. She stayed curled in the empty hole. Then she felt his footsteps coming; she felt them in her cheek as she lay on the ground, and as he came closer she was afraid. When she saw him she'd know, and she dreaded knowing. She lay with her hands pressed close against the earth, feeling for safety, some way that they could be as they were before. As he came in, the smell of liquor drifted down to her.

'What have you done with them?' She spoke into the ground, tight and low. He didn't answer. She could hear him breathing. 'Our pouara – what have you done?' She raised herself up to look at him. It was hard to see his face. His outline was swaying. A bottle swung from his hand, half full, gleaming.

'Temana?'

'You shouldn't have them anyway – you know that.' He staggered towards her. 'Get up.'

'So you took them.' Anger clotted her chest; her voice was thick with it. 'You took my pouara.'

'Herenui shouldn't make them, and you shouldn't keep them. They belong in the past. All burned. Gone now. All gone. Crying in the night... all that crying...' Temana's words stumbled. He was dazed with drink.

'You didn't burn them?' She pushed up onto her knees to face him.

'Fill the hole,' Temana's mouth was sliding around his words. His face looked blurred in the gloom of the hut.

‘Is that all you can say?’ Atea got to her feet. ‘That’s no good! What have you done with them? I want them back! Where are they? Who’s got them?’

‘Ah hia. They’re...they’re bottles now – ‘He staggered as he spoke. ‘Bottles. See how pretty they are?’ He lifted the bottle in his hand upwards, waving it from side to side as if he was proud of it. Speechless, Atea stared at him. He swigged from the bottle, then waved it again. ‘Very pretty. Bottles instead. Very good. Now they won’t cry. No more crying...Claude said you shouldn’t hide them. He said the miss- missionaries – Pastor Coe – didn’t want -‘ Temana stopped and belched.

‘What do you mean? I don’t care about the missionaries. They don’t understand. You’ve taken away my babies!’

Waving his hand at her, Temana stumbled sideways. ‘Let’s put the mat back.’ He fell to his knees beside the hole, clumsily setting the bottle into the earth. ‘I’ll do it,’ he mumbled. ‘I’ll do it - I want to lie down.’ With his cupped hand, he began to sweep soil into the hole, but his swipes were too big; the soil sprayed across the hole, over the mat.

Atea watched, stunned. ‘You’re not sorry?’ Not bothering to answer, he continued his scraping – like a baby himself, swatting at the earth. ‘Temana.’ Atea knelt down beside him, taking hold of his shoulder to turn him towards her. ‘Are you not sorry?’

For a moment, being so close to him, touching him, reminded her of loving him. The smell of his hair was in her nostrils. She felt the give and love of them together just as she knew that it wouldn’t happen again. He turned his liquor filled breath full in her face. Raising his eyebrows as if he was trying to keep his drooping eyelids up, he gazed at her as if she was far away on an atoll in the distance, as if he barely knew who she was. How could he not know how she felt? His eyes were sliding sideways as if he were a child falling asleep.

‘Temana. You’ve hurt me... look what you’ve done. You put my heart under your heel.’

He waved his head from side to side as if he agreed. ‘You don’t need them – and I needed - some drink. You weren’t here – and I like you here - ‘ Leaning towards her, he

knelt up and shoved his arm around her, almost pushing her over. Atea tried to shake him off, but he clasped his other hand behind her neck, pulling her to him, his huge arms around her. 'Be kind to me -'

'You're not my Temana!' Dragging herself out of his arms, she sprang up and stepped back. 'My Temana loved me.' He picked up his bottle and gulped at it; his whole body loose and careless. His carelessness was enraging. 'You don't love me – you don't care about what's important for me!'

As she spoke, he struggled to his feet, frowning as if he still didn't understand.

'Ah hia, Atea, don't be angry - they don't matter – Claude said -'

Atea cut him short.

'They do matter,' she shouted. 'They DO!'

All her life with him was emptied out, pointless. All the love she'd given was thrown in the dirt. He didn't care about the babies they'd made together, and he didn't care about her. She could feel the shock of it all through her. He'd betrayed her. Miri was right, all the days she'd waited for him to remember himself were wasted. She'd been stupid. She should have seen how it was and gone away. Hauata had seen how he was; she'd gone. Her own child knew better than she did.

As he stumbled towards her, his arms coming up to grab her again, Atea caught hold of the bottle. 'Get away,' she hissed.

He leaned forward, grabbing at her. Atea swung the bottle at his head, as hard as she could, fury and hatred racing through her, streaming down her arm. She watched the bottle shine in the air as the drink splashed down her forearm and ran off her elbow. Her arm smashed down.

The bottle broke on his skull. It made a dull sound. Lumps of glass fell down his body along with the rest of the liquor. Glass bounced on her feet as Temana stood for a moment. Her arm shivered and dripped. Her eyes were fixed on his. For a moment he looked back at her with surprise. Then he fell down. He hit the ground. A grunt escaped from the shape of him.

She stood panting, unable to move, as if she'd been hit with a club in her own belly. Temana tried to crawl, twitching his arms, but his arms gave up and stopped. They lay still, in the awkward shape of crawling.

Atea waited for him to move, but he didn't. The neck of the bottle was still in her hand. Looking down, she saw jagged shards, bigger than shark's teeth. She dropped the bottleneck, her heart loud in her chest, her fury turning to horror. Fear twisted in her gut as she sank down beside him, her hands sliding over his shoulders, holding them, warm and firm. She laid her chest against his back. He grunted again. It was a sound of mild regret, as if he'd pulled up a fish that was smaller than he thought; yet it was good humoured too, as if he'd been foolish to imagine it might be a bigger fish. His shoulders let go. They became mounds of flesh in her hands. There was no Temana in them. But his skin was still warm. He smelt of his same smell, the scent of his body that she loved. That she used to love.

'Temana?'

Blood was all around his head, flowering like hibiscus.

Chapter 6

Oui-oui soldiers hauled her through the night to their garrison. Atea kept forgetting how to move her feet, her body as numb as her heart. There was a prison at the fort where they shut people up all alone. She deserved to be alone. The soldiers' lanterns swung from their hands in the dark. Her hands were wet. Was it Temana's blood? She rubbed them on her pareo.

When they opened the door into the small room, she saw the lizard straight away. Even though it wasn't dawn yet, she could see its eyes shining in the light from the Oui-oui lantern. Temana's animal. He was sitting above the window, waiting for her. He turned and looked at her, a look that made her shiver. She clung onto the heavy door, but the soldiers knocked her wrists away and pushed her in, slamming it behind her.

'Plus tard, ma chérie.' Their laughter trickled over their feet walking away.

The lizard watched. Atea put her back against the door. She knew he was here for Temana. What else was there to think of, to feel? Temana, Temana, Temana. His name beat like a drum. She slid down against the door and looked around at her prison, hands flat on the earth floor.

The cell smelt bad. Old sweat and misery. A bucket stank in the corner. There were two windows; one behind her in the door, with bars across it. The gaps were wide enough to put her arm through, but she didn't want to; those soldiers were out there, not so far away. She could hear their talk. The window in the wall opposite was high and small; she could see dawn beginning to breathe into the sky up there. There was no water for washing or drinking. What did it matter if they came back? Whatever they did, she deserved it, she knew she deserved it.

As the sun rose, Atea lay down on the floor. The earth was all that was familiar in this wrong place. She rested her face on it, going back to the beginning, as far back as she could remember, from the early days when they were young together, after the burning of the gods. She remembered meeting Temana for the first time, when her grandmother was ill.

He came from Raiatea with his people when Puatea was dying, and he was kind to her. Not many words came from his lips, but he stayed with her every day. In those days he was as beautiful as the sunset. The lizard watched as she closed her eyes and remembered.

Puatea had fallen ill when Atea was fifteen; her face and neck swelled up so she could only drink coconut milk. Puatea was the island's midwife, much loved, and many people came to do the healing, massaging her body and singing to her through her fever. Their hands were tender on her. Temana sat with the relatives from Raiatea, very quiet beneath his thick, lustrous hair. He was seventeen, with broad shoulders to paddle a canoe through the waves.

Each morning Temana went out to fish in the lagoon, and came back with his catch strung across his back, shining. Atea made the fire for cooking, and they stayed outside together, while the others made the ho'oponopono ceremony. Everyone told their stories. This one had taunted Puatea when she was a child, jealous of her long, long hair. That one had been angry because Puatea was midwife to his wife who'd died in labour. While the people talked, Puatea grew hotter and her neck swelled more. On the second day, Temana brought a big fish, laying it out on a flat stone with ceremony. It was a rainbow fish. He stroked its scales flat, spreading out the fins of its tail. Atea remembered the beauty of his hands; wide and strong, with a special care in the way he touched the fish. She knew what it meant when a man brought a present. She waited for him to ask to meet her, on the beach, or at the palm groves – the usual places that a man meets a woman. But he said nothing; he just smiled and went away to wash.

On the third day of the ho'oponopono Puatea told them that she was thankful, but all she wanted was to float up to the mountain. Everyone knew which mountain she meant. Not even Atea's mother Reva asked her to stay; she just took hold of Puatea and wept. One by one everyone put their hands on Puatea, made their farewells, then went to sit outside. It was evening when she died.

Atea left Puatea's place. She left her mother with all the other mourners, and went to their hut. She curled up on the floor and cried. The sobs were great black stones lumping out of her throat.

When Atea opened her eyes, the lizard wasn't watching her any more. It was light. He'd gone to sit above the bucket where flies were buzzing; he was making a good breakfast with his darting tongue. The sound of the soldiers doing their marching up and down, up and down, stamped through the high window. It was hot; afternoon. Her mouth was dry, but there was no water. Guards came to look at her through the hole in the door. Although she didn't understand most of the words they said, she knew what they meant.

Her hands felt unclean. There were places on her pareo that were dark with Temana's blood, but she couldn't wash. The soldiers stopped marching up and down their yard. Slowly, slowly, the afternoon became hotter. The walls of the cell flushed red. The floor was soaked with his blood. The cell filled up with red. If she closed her eyes it was red behind her eyelids. Temana was angry. If she opened her eyes the lizard looked at her and wouldn't stop. She was sorry. Her husband. Hauata, without a father. She lay on the floor as close to the earth as she could get. It was the only part of this Oui-oui place she knew.

Was Temana really dead? He must be. People came when he was lying on the ground; Miri, Heremanu, Herenui. Then Oui-ouis came, and they wouldn't let her stay. Miri tried to stop them from taking her, but the soldiers pushed her away. In all the screaming, Temana stayed on the ground and never moved. He was dead. Her husband was dead. She'd killed her daughter's father. At least Hauata didn't see him lying there, broken. She didn't know. Not yet, anyway –news would get to Raiatea soon enough, and she wouldn't be with Hauata to tell her. Someone else would tell her.

The red darkened into night. As it got darker there was quiet; all the birds going to sleep, the crickets folding up their legs for the night, the flies settling their wings on their backs. The cricket faded into the wall high up above the window.

Temana stayed behind to be with Atea when his people went back to Raiatea. Reva said perhaps she was too young, perhaps she might want to go on visiting the coconut groves

until she found the man she liked best of all, but Atea knew she'd already found him. In his own way, Temana wooed Reva as well as her, watching for things he could do to help, taking her out in his canoe, asking her to show him where the parrot fish swam, where the rays came to feed. Because he came from Raiatea, he didn't know the waters of Tahiti, and Reva liked to show him. Her mother's smile when they returned from fishing pleased Atea even more than the fish they brought back. She knew he'd won Reva over when she showed him where her shark lived.

In the quiet the soldiers came back, four footsteps soft in the passage outside. They stopped at the door. Keys rang together, then scraped at the door. In the corner of the cell Atea lay still, watching. Slowly, the door pushed open. Their lantern lit them up. They closed the door softly behind them, like women being careful with a sleeping child.

They didn't talk. The one in front came across the cell, his knee crashing into her thigh, grabbing her by the hair and arm, his boots hard across her shins. He smelt of the Oui-oui drink. The other one stood and watched. Kicking out one leg, she wrenched sideways, twisting under him to escape his grip. He didn't let go of her hair as she twisted, tearing at its roots as she pulled away from him, the red all through her. The other one came and held her down.

Atea opened her mouth, dragging in air to scream, but the first Oui-oui punched her. Her chin smashed sideways into the floor. Her nails bit into the ground. The blow to her face made a noise ring in her ears. A word spat onto her from his mouth, but she didn't know what it was.

He pulled up her pareo.

The other one held her while the soldier did what he wanted. If she screamed, others might come. She was quiet as the soldiers smeared their anger and disgust on her. Into her.

The Oui-oui finished, but stayed on her, panting his sour breath into her face until the other one pulled him off. He'd already undone his belt, ready. When he knelt down, the first one stood on her hands to stop her struggling. Above her head, he fastened his trousers.

She closed her eyes, turned her face to the side as the second Oui-oui pushed at her. When he finished he stood up and kicked her legs together. The other one took his boots off her hands. They were big with pain. She lay very still while they went out, afraid that more might come. There were many soldiers. They locked the door, and went away without calling out. In the corner of the cell, she curled up tight into the walls.

There was no water to wash them off, not even to rinse out her mouth. Footsteps came and went, but no one came in. Most of all, she wanted to wash, but she could only spit on her hands and wipe them on her pareo. When she moved, she wanted to be sick, but there was nothing in her belly. Waves of disgust rose up inside her and had nowhere to break. All the ancestors looked down. The small square of the cell window held the stars.

Chapter 7

The afternoon sun bore down on Roberts and Henry, buttoned up in full formal regalia as they made their way up the dusty track towards the Governor's house. Roberts mopped his face with a handkerchief embroidered with English flowers, for once omitting to remark on the skilful needlework of his beloved fiancée Emily. Henry found it touching that Roberts was so fond, but he'd exhausted his supply of embroidery compliments some months before.

They were almost halfway to the house when a solidly built native woman appeared on the track. For a moment Henry was tempted to bow, such was the ferocious hauteur of her carriage, but the sweat streaming down her face and the rumpled state of her striped missionary dress stopped him. Shooting a cautionary, sideways glance at Roberts, he wondered if she might perhaps be mad. Something red was smeared on her temples. With her feet planted wide apart, she pointed at him, her finger aiming straight at his face.

‘You tapitane?’

Henry detested pointing, but answered civilly, in Tahitian. ‘Yes, I'm Captain Henry. Ia-orana.’

‘Ia-orana. I am Miri.’

Henry thought he recognised the word. Miri. What did it mean? A kiss? A loving caress?

Her greeting was followed by a Tahitian tirade that he did his best to follow. He understood some words and phrases from the outpouring, but not all. ‘Atea killed her Temana because he is mad with bad thoughts from the Oui-oui soldiers. She isn't bad, but the Oui-ouis took her. They keep her there. Alone – all alone.’ Miri pointed up the road towards the garrison. ‘Governor says kill her. We say no.’ She stamped her foot, and puffs of dust shrouded her feet. ‘There is *why* she killed him - everyone knows how it was with him. Temana talked Oui-oui talk. Now Pastor Coe and Governor say make tattoo on her

face, then she can live. Tattoo or die! Governor says yes. They want to make her bad for always! You English; pastor English – you can stop him?’

Miri grabbed hold of Henry’s sleeve as she finished her speech. She was so close Henry could smell her; coconut oil and sweat. What he’d thought was perspiration running down her face was actually a stream of tears. Blood was drying on her temples and in her hair - perhaps she was deranged? The emotion in her voice was unmistakable, even if he wasn’t sure he understood what she was saying. Kindly, Roberts tried to steer her out of the sun into the shade of a nearby tree, thus encouraging her to release her grip on the captain. Miri withdrew her arm from Roberts and stood alone in the shade, looking from one man to the other, her voice breaking as she pleaded with them.

‘I ask you for help. Help Atea.’

Henry’s instinct was that this was none of his business. It wouldn’t do for him to begin his stay by meddling with decisions the French had made. It seemed a rough justice, but he knew nothing of the case, so how could he interfere?

‘Your cousin - Atea - kills her husband? She says she kill him?’ Henry spoke his halting Tahitian quietly in an effort to calm her.

‘Yes. But he hurt her. Everyone knows this. He hurt her many times. I told her to go but no. He was good before - she waited for him to be good again. She loves her husband.’

‘And Governor Bruat says kill her? But Pastor Coe - says make tattoo and she lives? Make tattoo on her face?’ Surely his Tahitian was inadequate; there must be something he wasn’t grasping. ‘It is good to live - not to die?’ Surely a reprieve from a death sentence was good news?

Miri placed the heels of her palms under her chin, fanning out her fingers around her face as if it were a precious flower. The gesture probably wasn’t having the effect she was hoping for, thought Henry. What he saw was a sweating, tear streaked harpy with wild hair and blood spattered clothing. She looked every inch the savage – yet when he looked into her eyes there was fear.

‘Here! They say put it here!’ Miri patted her cheeks. ‘To tell everyone – but everyone knows... A bad word! If they put a bad word on her, her beauty will be gone.’ Miri pulled at her own face, grimacing. ‘The Governor walks away from listening. Please, tapitane, stop them – if they take her beauty she wants to die.’

Henry had read of the high value the islanders placed on beauty, along with bravery, but surely this was melodramatic in the extreme. ‘I see many tattoos here,’ he suggested. ‘Tahitian people like tattoos? On faces, on legs, on -’ He patted his chest, unable to remember the word.

Miri dropped her arms to her sides in obvious frustration and despair. ‘A bad word - on her face. A word to make her bad.’ She spoke slowly and loudly. ‘Feel bad every day. On her face!’ Miri cupped her hands to her face again as if protecting her own cheeks from the thought. ‘You stop them - you talk to them?’

He felt sympathetic - she was obviously distressed - but he had little hope of being able to help her, nor much reason to, if her friend was a self confessed murderer. Trying to interfere with the Governor’s agreement with the missionaries would be at best undiplomatic. Taking her beauty was hardly an outrageous penance for murder. It didn’t seem to have occurred to Miri that perhaps this woman should feel bad every day. He straightened his back.

‘Governor says tattoo.’ He wanted to say that if you kill someone, in England you would also be killed.

Miri’s dark eyes filled with misery. ‘But you English tapitane. English help us. Your Queen big sister to our Queen. She promised to look after us like mother, like sister – ‘ She spread out her hands in supplication. ‘You big brother...’

Her eyes were so eloquent he was reminded of Elizabeth – didn’t she plead as passionately to their mother - for him? He was her twin, her big brother by a matter of minutes. He remembered Elizabeth standing in front of their unbending mother, white with terror, on the day mother found out about him and Grace. That moment was burned into his memory; he could even remember the pattern in the carpet as he recalled the scene, and his

mother's acid comments silencing him with shame. Elizabeth was so brave; she hated to cross their mother, but for him she'd dared to plead, to beg, just as this woman was doing. The correspondence between his beloved twin and this Miri was strange and unsettling; Elizabeth was gentle and kind, yet had roused herself in his defence. Miri was doing the same. He looked at her, trying to see her beyond this moment, sitting in her hut, talking with her husband perhaps. He had no idea what her usual demeanour might be; he knew nothing beyond her current frantic appeal.

Miri fell to her knees before them, and began striking herself hard at the temple. Fresh blood soaked into her hair. Roberts cried out in alarm, while Henry was tempted to reach out, to stop her, but he resisted his impulse, clasping his hands behind his back instead.

'Stop – stop,' he said. 'I talk to Governor. We see him now.' He gestured at himself and his Lieutenant. 'We talk with him.'

Her hand stopped in mid-air. She looked up at him. 'Yes – yes - you talk. You tell him no. Tomorrow they make the tattoo – tomorrow. You talk now.'

'I talk.' Henry held out his hands to calm her as he tried to think of the right words. 'And I listen.' He wanted to say he'd make no promises, but the word for promise eluded him, if there was one.

She seemed mollified. She wiped tears and blood from her cheeks with her wrists. She didn't get up, but continued to gaze at them. It was unnerving. Henry turned away. As they continued up the track, he glanced back. Miri was still kneeling in the dust, staring after them.

'Don't look, Sir, or she may begin again.' Roberts muttered.

'What the devil was she hitting herself with?'

'Ellis wrote about it - they use a shark's tooth to strike themselves - did you see it in her hand? Apparently they do it with barely any provocation - if their child hurts itself –if someone dies.' Roberts shook his head. 'Extremely messy business...' He mopped his face with his handkerchief. 'Anyway, that was well handled, I thought, Sir.'

'I intend to keep my word, Roberts. I shall speak to the Governor.'

‘Won’t that be a touch risky, Sir - shouldn’t we stick to looking after our own interests? You can’t get dragged into every native dispute on the island.’

‘We’ll have no shortage of time while we’re here. If I may offer some advice of my own, time can be the pivot of successful diplomacy.’ He wasn’t impressed with Roberts’ attempt to tell him what to do. ‘We don’t know who that woman is, nor what influence she may have, and there’s no need to dismiss her request out of hand. One can always demur. I only said I’d speak to him – to find out more; I’m not necessarily going to argue her case.’ Henry glanced back. Miri had disappeared. ‘Also, if I ask for something now that Bruat refuses, he may be less likely to refuse my next request.’

‘Ah. Point taken, Sir. Very canny.’ Roberts bowed his head as he walked, but Henry knew he was smiling.

The house came into view; a shabby looking building with some attempt at self importance embodied by two large pillars on either side of the door. Around to the south side lay a low building that was obviously a barracks. In front of it was a dusty parade ground, where a few men were playing a game with balls in the dust. It looked more as if they were on holiday than engaged in hostilities. A fragile wooden fence enclosed an area in front of the house itself, where it looked as if someone was endeavouring to make a garden. Rose bushes struggled in the sandy dust, and a line of shells outlined a flowerbed sparsely dotted with plants in various stages of decline. Henry felt sorry for the Governor’s wife; it was usually the women who made these attempts.

‘I’ll wager Madame Bruat yearns for home,’ commented Henry. ‘I’ve heard that she’s of a delicate disposition. Ideally, you need a robust wife for this kind of posting.’ He almost kicked himself for mentioning wifely attributes, not wishing to provoke another speech from Roberts on Emily’s perfection.

But Roberts overlooked the opportunity. ‘Do you know anything of Bruat?’

‘Not much,’ replied Henry. ‘A rather foppish officer I met in London knew him quite well – apparently his feet are different sizes and he strokes his moustache if he’s being slippery. Observe him as closely as you can. If you want to make someone uncomfortable,

looking at their feet is often effective – perhaps more so than most with him. Don't be too obvious – just a glance now and then, as if you can't help looking. Mild consternation.'

'Thank you, sir – an excellent diplomatic technique.'

'I wouldn't divulge that to just anyone, you know.' They smiled at each other. 'As far as Bruat's concerned, we're here only as observers while our governments negotiate over Tahiti. Bruat need know nothing of our own aims. We're charming but straightforward naval officers, none too bright, either. Ask as many inane questions as you like, my good roast beef.'

As they reached the wobbly fence around the Governor's woebegone garden, two soldiers stationed at the door came to attention. Their uniforms were faded from standing in the sun. Their collars and armpits were stained with sweat.

Henry turned and looked back at the vista stretching down to the sea. Roberts stopped beside him. The sound of laughter floated over from the nearby garrison buildings, but overall it was quiet except for the buzz of flies and the distant wash of the waves. Lush green forest stretched out on either side of the bay, clothing the sides of the mountains that rose up steeply from the shore. From this vantage point, the turquoise lagoon contrasted with the deep blue of the sea beyond the reef. Sprays of white water leapt up where the reef encircled the island. Frigate birds drifted over the three ships at anchor in the harbour; the Salamander looked delicate next to the two French men of war.

Henry shrugged. 'It's going to be such a hardship for us to be here for six months - maybe even a whole year –'

'I think I can bear it,' Roberts smiled back. 'Although Emily writes as if it's a prison sentence.'

The guards stood aside as they entered. They were ushered into the principal room of the residence, where they weren't kept waiting long before the Governor appeared and offered the usual enquiries about their voyage. A large portrait of King Louis Phillippe glared down as they exchanged salutations from their respective governments. The sparse rugs and furniture in the room had a battered air – they hadn't benefited from the climate.

Henry noticed an equally worn look around Bruat's eyes, and several inflamed mosquito bites on his cheeks and hands. A large waxed moustache decorated his top lip like a prized ornament on a mantelpiece. Henry resisted the temptation to glance at his feet. Roberts was quiet as Henry enquired about the current situation with the rebel Tahitians.

'Many men have gone up onto the mountain,' Bruat replied, 'they have a camp there, many hundreds if not thousands, we believe – all the strongest. It's difficult to negotiate with them up there, so we try to cut off supplies, but the women, I'm sure, take food. They set off to picnic with baskets of fish and breadfruit and when I send my soldiers to follow them, the women lead them to a waterfall where they all need to bathe –' Bruat rolled his eyes. 'And of course nothing is discovered.'

'Most frustrating,' Henry agreed dutifully.

'But of course they cannot succeed – it's only a matter of time. In the end we'll get them under the thumb. Sometimes the warriors come down and attack, but they have no guns. They're hard to shoot at night, though, dark in the dark. No,' Bruat sighed, 'we have more men and weapons, but it's hard to have a proper battle... they disappear into the forest, and come out when it suits them.' He shrugged. 'What do you call it – skirmishes?.'

Henry nodded. 'Yes, skirmishes. You speak excellent English. Do they have any leaders with whom you negotiate – chiefs? Or are they simply a rabble?'

The Governor looked quizzical. 'Rabble?'

'The rebels – are they organised?'

'Queen Pomare is a figurehead, recognised by some chiefs, but she is to stay in Moorea. We've paid her for her 'loyalty' in francs, but she is unreliable...' He shrugged again. 'A woman, after all - she changes her mind. Sometimes she agrees Tahiti must be a French Protectorate, and sometimes she looks for friends elsewhere. No doubt she'll look for favour from you.'

'We have some presents from our Queen for her; it would be remiss of me not to deliver them.' Henry was going to make no assurances to Bruat. 'They have an old association.'

Reluctantly, Bruat agreed on the etiquette of this. A small amount of moustache stroking occurred as they discussed the terms of the Queen's exile, Bruat appearing unwilling to reveal how much the Queen had been paid, but complaining she was greedy. Henry considered most of the Governor's statements to be opinion rather than fact.

After a while, Madame Bruat joined them for refreshments of wine, toasted breadfruit and preserved meats.

'It's so hard to eat in this heat, but please do try.'

She was a small woman with fatigue in every gesture. Apart from asking if they carried any letters, and pressing them to slices of roasted breadfruit, she contributed little to the conversation.

Roberts made much of his first encounter with breadfruit. 'How can a fruit taste so much like – toast? Extraordinary. I'd read of it, of course, but it's both delicious and peculiar!'

Henry watched as Roberts exercised his charm on Madame Bruat. She seemed pleased, and began to relax. However, when Bruat suggested they might like to see his collection of native curiosities, she made immediate farewells and left the room. Henry had seen some of the shrunken heads that were traded from the Pacific, favoured by sailors, so was prepared for something gruesome.

Bruat led them into an anteroom with shuttered windows. Various carved stone bowls, effigies and delicate looking tools were laid out on tables and crammed inside a couple of glass fronted cabinets. Pointing to a large bowl in the shape of a turtle, Bruat declared it to be a cava bowl. 'Used in ceremonies and gatherings. The cava is chewed and spat out in here, then they add coconut milk and ferment, strain it with a cloth, and it is a ceremonial drink. Everyone drinks from the same bowl.'

It was big enough for a small child to sleep inside.

'Chewed and spat out?' Roberts' face was a picture. 'Really? And everyone drinks it? Does no one mind?'

Bruat laughed. ‘Well - the ones who chew the cava are the beautiful young women...’

Henry bent over a stone figure the same size as a baby, rounded and chubby, with its legs and arms drawn close as if it were curled up asleep.

‘What’s this? It looks like a child.’

‘Ah, they call them atua. Something to worship. They used to be kept in the rafters of the huts. It is a god, or ancestor, perhaps – some kind of idol. Most wooden ones were burned by the missionaries – or traded. Also small ones, like these.’ Bruat indicated a pair of figures lying side by side on a cloth. ‘These are hidden from missionaries - buried, I’m told. I was lucky to get them; the natives think they are secret. They call these pouara.’

Henry bent over the two smooth figures, skilfully carved out of wood, with discs of shell for eyes. One was plainly male, the other female. Both had rounded bellies and bent up legs like babies. They were the length of his hand, but he didn’t want to touch them. The hairs on the back of his neck pricked as he looked at them lying together. They reminded him of Eliza’s babies; she’d had twins, a boy and a girl. When he’d visited, her twins had been swaddled up in the same crib, pressed close together with their ancient baby faces, their waxy eyelids sealed tight. He and Elizabeth must have looked similar, always so close – from birth, and even before - he missed her even now.

Beside him, Roberts was picking up some small tools.

‘What are these for? Some kind of craft? Leatherwork?’

‘Ah yes – those are for the tattooing.’ Bruat picked one up and turned it over in his hand. It was slim as a pencil, with a sharp, serrated head bent over like a tiny adze. ‘These make the cuts,’ he said, pressing it into the skin on the back of his hand. He picked up another small tool and demonstrated how it could be used to tap the back of the other, like a hammer and chisel. ‘Hitting it with this one – to make cuts. You want to feel?’ Roberts held out his hand while Bruat tapped the back of it using the tools. ‘They break the skin and make raised lines, scars, to make the patterns, then they rub ash from the fire into the cuts to make them fat, and dark.’

‘Sounds painful.’ Roberts said. There was a thin red mark on his hand. Henry caught his eye; he was doing a grand job of appearing dull.

‘It is honour to be tattooed. Sometimes they get fever after, the wounds can be infected, people die.’ Bruat rubbed at the mosquito bites on his face.

Henry thought of Miri. Here was the perfect opportunity.

‘Is it often used it as a punishment?’ he asked.

Bruat looked a little suspicious. ‘Never, as far as I know. But the other day the Pastor came to me and begged for that; you’ve heard about it already?’

‘Yes. It’s an inventive punishment. Was it a crime of passion, perhaps?’ Henry wondered if that could provide mitigation for a Frenchman.

‘It was a murder. Perhaps passion.’ Bruat pushed his lips out. ‘These people are passionate...even the women can be violent.’ Bruat smiled a lascivious smile that made Henry’s skin creep. ‘But this murderess is different – she admit her guilt. A murder is a murder. She killed her husband, so she must be punished. Altogether, I thought the tattooing was an amusing solution. Pastor Coe suggested it. After all, why hang a serviceable woman?’

Bruat’s last comment hung in the air like a wrong note. Henry tried to sound equally casual. ‘Perhaps she’ll die anyway,’ he suggested, ‘from the tattooing?’

‘Perhaps. But we have to make example. These people are impulsive - sometimes like children. A tattoo instead of the death sentence is lenient, non? It’s my favour to the Pastor, he has been here many years. He’s English.’

‘I applaud your leniency –’

‘No, no, it’s a practical measure. She is useful – she is a – what you call mid-wife? We prefer the women to be friendly, obviously. If we execute her, then there is no mid-wife. This is a useful solution - we can’t just let her go.’ Bruat shrugged.

‘I take your point.’ Henry exchanged glances with Roberts. After all, they knew little of the case, and it wasn’t a British concern. There might be more important battles.

Roberts turned his attention to the carving on another wooden bowl. Unashamedly obscene figures were depicted in a variety of positions all around its perimeter. He cleared his throat, peering at the antics of two women wrapped together. ‘Very – er – realistic.’

‘Another cava bowl?’ Henry asked, welcoming the change of subject.

Bruat nodded, pointing out the vigorous relations between the males as well as females. Roberts’ cheeks flushed – the figures fitted together in the most inventive combinations. Bruat held forth on the native propensity for frequent copulation as they examined the piece.

‘I imagine this would cause quite a stir in Europe,’ Henry said with as much tact as he could manage. Outrage would be more likely. He realised why Madame Bruat had left.

Bruat laughed. ‘It will remain a private collection, of course.’

Their visit concluded in an agreeable atmosphere, with Bruat reminding them before they left of the strict curfew that was in place; at night, no person was allowed beyond the limits of the village by sea or by land. Behind his affable manner, he emphasised his authority. ‘You don’t want to be shot by mistake – warn your sailors...’

Henry allowed himself a surprised glance at Bruat’s feet, making sure the Governor noticed. They were indeed noticeably different in size.

Once back on board, the rest of the day was spent receiving visits. Dawkin’s and Thwaite’s floggings were put off until the next day so as not to distract their visitors. First came the captains of the *Ariane* and *l’Uranie*. To each, Henry stressed his role as diplomatic observer, which appeared to reassure them. Next came the British consul, the Pastor Coe and his wife, and several missionaries. Last and most promising of all was a doctor named Johnson, who struck Henry as an amiable and intelligent fellow. He demonstrated a wry cast of mind, enquiring after the previous callers, and offering a witty epithet for each. The consul; consoled by his own importance, the Coes could do better to go forth more and multiply less... Of all his callers, Henry thought Johnson might provide refreshing companionship during his months on the island. He promised to visit the doctor’s home.

After all the visitors had gone, Roberts and Henry went up on deck to watch the sun set behind the island of Moorea, which lay opposite the harbour. Grandiose tropical colours suffused the clouds above the island, staining the sea all around. The two men congratulated each other on the beginnings of their mission while they marvelled at the drama of their surroundings. As the heat of the day subsided, Henry was amused to note that he had a yearning for a hot, buttered scone. He and Roberts reminisced happily about muffins, crumpets and teacakes before they went down to their dinner of roast pork and breadfruit.

Chapter 8

Inside the big hut everyone gathered around her, and she was grateful for that. Her people were closest; they made a circle, sitting with their backs to the Oui-oui soldiers, who stood behind them all around the open sides of the hut. Even from where she lay on the ground she could smell the sweat of the soldiers. Sharp knives shone at the ends of their guns. Everyone was quiet under the wide roof. Temana's people weren't there, although Atea thought they might have come to see her suffering. She looked at the faces of her people, and at their sad hands lying still, waiting. Everyone was waiting for Vetea to come. Under her breath, Atea called Hina to come from the sea into her nostrils, into her heart, to calm her.

The sun was high when Vetea came into the hut. He was carrying his tools in a wrapping of barkcloth. Atea watched his face carefully, knowing his mood could affect his work. He was the kahuna of tattooing; he'd agreed to do it although he knew he wouldn't be properly paid. There'd be no feast afterwards – none of the usual celebrations with dancing and cava. His face was set and serious.

The pastor arrived as he always did, after everyone else. His boots thudded their importance into the ground. Atea pictured him sitting in his own hut, patting his wife like a dog as he waited until everyone was waiting for him. When his dark shadow came into the big hut, Mrs Coe was behind him in the sunlight, fiddling with her bonnet strings. As the pastor came closer, wafts of difficulty came from the folds of his long black coat.

Miri took Atea's hand. The Pastor was too close to her head, his feet pointing at her face. Down below him, she was small as a child lying on the ground, with everyone tall around her. Pastor Coe cleared his throat, putting his feet wide apart as if the island might begin to rock once he began to speak. Atea looked at his shoes, black but covered with dust. She'd never seen his feet, and she thought of the Coes lying down together at night, their feet naked and touching. They'd be white as roots, soft and twisted from being kept in the darkness.

‘We are gathered today to see that right is done before God. This woman has killed her husband. In England, the payment for such a crime would be her own life. Yet we are allowing your own punishment here. God Almighty has moved us with his spirit, to mercy. Mercy. We are here to see God’s mercy.’

‘Amen,’ said Mrs Coe. Her bonnet bounced.

‘Governor Bruat has decided that this woman may live, to show you all that you must learn to live in the sight of God, remembering that His eyes are always upon you, seeing and knowing all that you do.’ The Pastor looked around, rocking on his heels, heavy with his own greatness. Many of the islanders gazed into their laps in embarrassment. ‘You Tahitians show so much feeling – and we see today how dangerous that can be. You let your passions lead you. You weep and laugh and are as quick to anger as children. Children learn, with the help of their parents, and God, to be quiet, to be good. This woman has killed her husband.’ His fat finger pointed to her. ‘It is time to learn, as a child learns, to control dangerous feelings.’

Atea wished he’d stop talking so Vetea could begin, but the Pastor lifted up his black book and began to read from it in his Bible voice that was almost singing. As he read, she took care to breathe. Pastor Coe was so pleased with himself, proud that he’d changed the Governor’s decision, but she was willing to die. She deserved to die. Temana was dead.

Vetea held his wrap of barkcloth in his hands, and began to unroll it beside Atea as the pastor spoke. She watched him smooth out the barkcloth, thinking how he’d walked from Fa’aa early that morning, hoping he wasn’t too tired by his walk, so he could be quick. Vetea’s tattoos were known for their beauty – graceful palms and smooth waves that lay close with the curves of leg and buttocks, moving as they moved. He made the men tattoos for their deeds and lineage; their ancestry carved into their faces in dots and arches. His fingers were so strong and subtle even people from other islands sent for him. His son, who was to be kahuna after him, had died last season with the scarlet fever. Vetea never spoke much, and nowadays he spoke even less.

When they knew she was pregnant, Temana had a ray tattooed on his back. When a girl became a woman, she had babies; when a youth became a man he had tattoos cut into his skin. Vetea made Temana's tattoo. Inside the shape of the ray there were curves, sweet as breaking waves, all curled around many faces of fish. She kissed the fishes looking out between his shoulder blades, peeping between the crusted lines of healing. The tattoo was made in two long ceremonies while she was growing their child – first the shape of the ray swimming, the deepest cuts, and then later, when that had healed, the fishes inside.

At last, the Pastor stopped reading words out and closed his Bible. He took something white out of his coat. Was he going to wipe his face? No. He pushed the white at Vetea. It wasn't a handkerchief, but something like barkcloth. Paper. They wrote their god stories on it, and the Bible. Pastor Coe opened the paper out, smoothed it flat and pointed at the marks on it.

'Copy this,' he said, 'onto her face.'

Not her face! Women never had tattoos on the face – was he making a mistake? Everyone around her leaned forward, murmuring. Vetea sat back on his heels, frowning. Sometimes he decorated the hands and feet of women with delicate patterns, but never their faces.

'Come on man, get to it!'

The Pastor was red, puffing air. Everyone was shocked by the way he spoke; giving no salutation to Vetea's skill, nor expressions of gratitude that he'd come. Even from upside down, she could see that Vetea's face showed the insult, his mouth drawing together as he took the paper. Her people craned to look as Vetea put it down beside her head, weighing it down with stones at each corner. Everything he did was careful. She turned her head to see the ugly shapes crawling across the paper with bent up knees and fat bellies. Vetea would make clean marks, but what he had to copy was ugliness. She turned away, unable to look.

'You shall all be reminded of her crime as she walks among you.'

Pastor Coe spoke slowly, as if Vetea might not understand, as if any of them could forget what she'd done. Ignoring him, his lips still tight around any answers he might want

to make, Vetea moved to the top of the mat, above her head. The Pastor shuffled aside as Vetea slid his knees forward, on either side of her head. Warmth from his thighs soothed her ears. His closeness felt like protection.

Pastor Coe turned the paper. 'This is the word. You must make the letters like this.' The pastor raised his voice. 'Do you understand?'

Everyone bowed their heads, shocked at his disrespect, staring at the ground. Vetea touched the marks on the paper. He couldn't read them, no one could, but he could see their awkward knees and elbows as well as anyone. He spoke the word out loud, slowly, for the pastor to understand that he knew.

'MUR – DER - ER.'

'Yes, that's right. Good man.'

Vetea spat on the ground, to the other side than the paper. Atea didn't dare move as he bent over her. She looked at Pastor Coe. Please don't upset Vetea. He's not here to be punished. Usually, when Vetea made a tattoo the shapes came mysteriously out of his hands, growing in the blood leaking around his tools while everyone watched to see what he'd make. They might ask for palm tree, lizard, or fish, as Temana had, but Vetea grew the tattoo from his own imaginings, from his own skill. By giving him the miserable shapes on the paper, the pastor might as well have slapped his head.

It felt as if everyone was holding their breath. Begin, Vetea, please begin. He shuffled forward so his knees were resting against her shoulders, close around her ears. Now she couldn't hear so well, but she could see Mrs Coe standing near, winding her hands together as if she was afraid, as if she was to feel the sharpness of Vetea's tools herself. Miri was as close as she could be without getting in Vetea's way, kneeling beside him at her right shoulder. No one spoke while Vetea laid out his tools on barkcloth. She knew what he had; some with small sharp teeth for biting into the skin, some with flat ends for making lines, for pushing the colour in. He took a long while laying them out, while Atea breathed and told her legs to be soft. He shook out rags for wiping blood. Herenui passed across the gourd

with the burned candlenut paste to make the colour. Everyone waited, and Atea breathed, feeling the cool of the sand under her fingertips, breathing and waiting.

It was a bad waiting. Usually there would be talking and singing, not silence. Some of the men would dig a cooking pit, or carry stones to heat in the fire, and the women would pound arrowroot and wrap food in leaves for cooking. In the silence that was there instead of making a feast, Atea knew it had to be done. Temana was dead. She was ready to be punished. Hoping he was watching, she looked up in the roof for lizards. She wanted to be punished.

When all was ready, Vetea clasped his thighs on either side of her head, holding it in place. She could smell the forest he'd walked through on his way –leaves and damp earth. The muscle and bone of him was tight around her. She couldn't turn her face from side to side. Be calm, be calm. Vetea called out to Tohu, god of tattooing, for his blessing and help. Pain was coming. The Pastor talked to his wife while Vetea prayed. It was a short invocation, much shorter than usual. Perhaps Vetea didn't want Tohu to see the ugly work he had to do.

At last Vetea laid his hands flat across her cheeks. His palms were warm, dry and hard. He began to press his fingers into her cheeks, feeling along the top of her mouth, above her lips, pressing the bone underneath, as if feeling how thick her skin was, how deep his tools could bite. Let him do his work. Then he pinched, hard, across both cheeks and under her nose, beginning the pain for her. Glad he was working as he always did, Atea let him hurt, let him begin. He struck a line across her face with his fingernails, making a rhythm, drumming, across and across.

When he stopped, she saw him pick up the uhi, the flat chisel for making the way, for the first cuts. He held it in front of her face, his thighs tightened as he picked up the mallet for striking the uhi. It was shaped like a small paddle. How good to be out in a canoe, a paddle in her hands, the coral sliding underneath. She closed her eyes.

The first blow. A bite. Her fingers grabbed at the sand at her sides. Another blow, and another. Stop stiffening, let the spine be soft. Someone began to whimper, and she was

glad Hauata was far away. The Pastor spoke to someone – not her - quieter than she'd heard before. Bites at her cheek came faster, and the whimpering got louder. Warm wet trickled down her neck. Vetea stopped to wipe the blood and his thighs loosened a little. There was scuffling. Atea opened her eyes to see Mrs Coe drooping over her husband's arm as he pushed through the soldiers, leading her away.

Vetea clamped his thighs and hammered at her face. Atea remembered when she was small, staring at Mrs Coe's mole, waiting for it to open its wings and fly away. She'd thought it was a beetle sleeping on her face. The uhi cut into her cheek. The pastor's wife had asked her what she was staring at. Atea remembered pointing at her cheek, surprised that Mrs Coe hadn't felt that beetle. Mrs Coe's face flushed, then her neck went red as well. How red her skin was. Mrs Coe's hand leapt up to the beetle, but it didn't fly away. She spoke cross words that Atea couldn't understand. After that, Miri called her Beetle.

Vetea stopped to wipe his uhi. Thinking about the Beetle made Atea's stomach clench. It was good to think about something angry. Vetea's blows hit hard and bright into her cheek. The darkness of the night Temana died, sharp with stars. Release the darkness; open the skin and let it out. The uhi worked across her cheek towards her top lip.

Then Miri began. Even though her eyes were shut Atea knew it was Miri making the song. Her chest warmed as Miri made the air hum. Her dear friend wouldn't sit by in silence, neglecting the usual chants to help the journeyer being tattooed. The pastor had gone. At first Miri hummed, then she began to chant.

Where are you going,

Basket of seed?

Even though it wasn't a proper ceremony, Miri was chanting to guide her through the pain. Atea wanted to show thanks, but she didn't dare move a finger. Miri's voice had never been sweet, but her mana was in it; the rub of the strength in her throat, like sand rubbed between fingers.

Where are you going,

Basket of seed?

Vetea didn't say stop. Thank you Vetea, maururu Miri. Some of the others began to hum too, men and women making a deep holding underneath the steady tread of Miri's notes. The singing was in the sand at her fingertips, in the depth of her chest. She could have wept for the love they were showing, holding onto each word as it hummed in the air.

Going to what,

Your basket of seed?

Others began to tread their feet in time. Atea wanted to curl up in the basket of seed, and be blown away.

Vetea's legs tensed as he began to hammer under her nose. A huge bird pecking. Hard against the bones of her gum. Her knees jerked with the shock of it. She forced her legs to be loose again, forced her knees to lie down. As the uhi pecked and pecked, she breathed in and in, and when Vetea stopped to wipe the uhi she breathed out, blowing the pain towards the sea. She wasn't going to moan like a girl. Temana didn't cry or moan when the fishes were cut into his back.

Welcome puhipuhi manuka.

This is the boundary,

A descendant of the gods.

I am a descendant.

Endure. Welcome the uhi. Maururu Miri. Wet on her cheek, sliding into her ears. Vetea wiping. Red humming in her face, inside as well as outside. Pain at the boundary of

the spirit world. The sun blazing in her skin where Vetea cut. Pain makes the boundary shake.

Be struck

Be struck.

Roll along, eh.

The sunset spread across her face; red, burning orange, and sharp, sharp yellow in the new cuts. No shapes, but the journey burned across, slow as the sun sinking. Whenever he stopped she breathed out, out, out.

Miri's voice led her on through the colours bursting in her face.

Roll along, eh.

Like a board on shore

Dream,

To be taken to the glinting sea.

Her people, out in the sea with their boards. The hug and suck of the waves. To be taken to the sea, to float there. Wet ran into her hair.

Guide the loved one,

Roll on,

Be a board on the shore

And let go.

How slowly the uhi travelled. Sometimes she could be a board, rolling to the shore, letting the waves take her. Blows echoed inside her head, aching her teeth as the uhi travelled across her top lip. Before each blow, she tried not to hold tight against it, just as she taught

young women in childbirth not to fight, but to let the pain in, let it grip and subside – to let it wash through them like a wave. Going with the wave, travelling with the wave, washing to the shore. When Vetea had hammered his uhi right across her lip and onto her other cheek he stopped, releasing her head from the grip of his thighs. Air around her head. Wet at her neck.

The women passed cups of cava over her to Vetea. They'd made it even though there'd be no celebration. Miri lifted up Atea's head and gave her some to drink. Her lips couldn't find the cup.

Miri whispered.

'It's half done. He's opened the skin. Now the colour. You didn't cry out. Stay brave – everyone will remember you were brave –' She was close. Atea felt for her hand. Miri's mouth near her ear. 'The Oui-ouis look disappointed. Perhaps they want you to cry and scream.'

Atea lifted her head to look. Soldiers passed a drinking bottle among them, pulling their lips back in a grimace after swallowing. Temana learned to do that.

When Vetea clasped her head between his legs again, she was ready. He loaded his fingers with ground candlenut, rubbing the paste into the notches of his tool. Then he tapped it deep inside the cuts, so the colour would stay. Scrape at the bowl, then a pause as he loaded the notched uhi, then digging into her face again. Grit in her teeth each time the bowl was scraped. Sand in her nails as she dug her fingers in the ground. Cava on Vetea's breath as he leaned over her. When he'd travelled the uhi right across her face again, he wiped the cuts with juice from bitter herbs. It burned and stung, but it was over. The tattoo was made.

Before he released her, Vetea pressed his thumbs onto her eyes so she could see the sun, red and gold inside her head. As he got up, she lay watching the colours floating inside her eyelids, surprised and honoured that he did that. It was his way of finishing, a respect to those who suffered bravely, a gesture he didn't make for everyone.

The soldiers left. Miri stroked Atea's hair as they walked away. Atea's teeth were aching so much from being pressed together that she felt as if she could spit them out. But her swollen lips wouldn't open. Heat throbbed in her face. Miri helped her to sit up. Pastor Coe came, his black coat flapping, closer and closer until he stood above her, his hands on his hips.

'Get back,' he snapped at Miri. 'You shouldn't be comforting her.'

Miri moved back, but she didn't leave. The Pastor's shadow fell on them as he bent down. He put his hand to her chin and tipped her face.

'I can't see. You – wipe the blood off.'

Miri dabbed gently at her face with a rag.

'What?' Pastor Coe hissed. 'For Heaven's sake!'

Then he began to bellow.

'Vetea! God save us – they can't be left for a moment! Idiot! What have you done?' He snatched up the paper that he'd given Vetea and strode away, shouting. 'Vetea Vetea, man, you've done it wrong!' He waved the paper in the air, looking around and shouting. 'I showed him, didn't I? Could I have been any clearer? Lord in Heaven! Where is the man? Vetea!'

Vetea was nowhere to be seen. The Pastor carried on shouting for him.

'Vetea, man! You've done it upside down!'

Later, after the sun had gone down, Miri helped Atea get up and walk to her hut, her head flaming on her shoulders like a torch. Miri left to get food from her husband, and while she was gone, Vetea came and took his payment. There was no feast, and no gifts – a little cava and some fish was not enough. Once again, she submitted, in the darkness, with his hands on her breasts, not on her face.

Chapter 9

After a few days in harbour, Henry decided to visit Queen Pomare in Moorea. He wondered how voluntary her exile was – surely no queen would willingly leave her people at the mercy of an occupying force? The island of Moorea sat on the horizon opposite Pape’ete, north west of Tahiti. It was a short trip, and he didn’t plan to stay long, but Henry knew the Governor would be suspicious about his visit. All the better, he thought, let him worry. Maybe Queen Pomare could be encouraged to muster opposition among the sovereigns of the nearby islands. If not, should Tahiti be relinquished to the British, she could prove a useful ally. As a courtesy, he and Roberts were going to inform Governor Bruat of their movements.

As they strolled up the beach from the launch, their attention was attracted by a crowd of Tahitians gathered around a large, open-sided hut. Some kind of nasal, penetrating singing, if one could call it that, emanated from the open walls of the building. Soldiers encircled the hut, holding their bayonets as casually as if they were on a weekend shooting party. They moved aside to allow the English officers through.

Henry and Roberts stepped inside the circle around the hut. About three dozen Tahitians were sitting on the ground, facing the centre of the hut. Heat concentrated under the thatched roof, rising up from the gathered bodies that smelt of coconut, fish and flowers. Once inside the circle, Henry began to feel uncomfortable, but now they were committed. As they shuffled through the seated Tahitians, steady chanting surrounded them like a miasma. It emanated from the mouths of many; the sound was passed around and around, a hypnotising drone. One woman appeared to be leading the chant - Henry recognised the distressed woman who’d accosted them on the track. What was her name? Miri? She was leaning over someone lying down on a mat, while an old man was bending over, tapping with some kind of tool. Henry hesitated, afraid they’d come across one of the public sexual

rituals as described by Ellis. Roberts touched his sleeve, his face concerned, jerking his head back over his shoulder. Clearly, he wanted to leave.

But Henry wanted to know what was happening. Listening to the chant, which seemed to be about seeds being carried in a basket, Henry scrutinised the faces he could see. They showed both sadness and concentration – far from the usual relaxed good humour. The chanting was continuous and heartfelt, underpinned by a low hum as the people on the ground repeated phrases, almost like a lullaby - but more urgent. Henry edged forwards until he could see over the people obscuring his view.

When he saw her he almost gasped aloud. She was lying on her back, her body just visible over the shoulders of those gathered around her. The old man had her head clasped between his thighs in a disturbing juxtaposition, her body stretched out lengthways in front of him. Her naked legs twitched as the old man tapped at her face with his bloody stick. Although he glanced up at Henry and Roberts as they came forward, he didn't hesitate in his pernicious work. Tattooing.

It looked brutal. The old man was using two evil-looking tools, tapping and cutting as if he were using a hammer and chisel. The woman's face oozed blood from a series of cuts across her cheek and under her nose. Her eyes were closed, although she appeared conscious, her fingers curled tight into the sand at her sides. Henry tried to remember her name, without success. He was familiar with injury; he'd seen men with the skin on their backs laid open by the lash - yet floggings, even though he might have ordered them, didn't made him feel as uncomfortable. Henry looked at Roberts; his cheeks were patched with scarlet.

Perhaps it was her femininity that made this such a shocking sight, Henry thought. Her legs relaxed a little, flopping apart as the tattooist stopped to wipe up blood with a grubby rag. He scratched his shoulder with the back of his stained tool, deep in concentration. Laid out before him, the woman's breasts were bare, gleaming with sweat, while her pareo rucked up around her thighs. Blood oozed from the cuts in her face into her hair. There was something about the atmosphere that struck an odd note. It didn't seem like

a gathering of the righteous witnessing a murderer's comeuppance. It felt more like a respectful group come together to mourn, to witness, even to commiserate.

Miri was sitting close by her friend, chanting with great intensity. Briefly, she looked towards them. It was a glance Henry understood, filled with disdain. Could he have secured some transmission of the sentence? The look in Miri's eye made him feel even more as if they were intruding, as if they'd walked into a family funeral. Tilting his head at Roberts, he moved back through the crowd. What was her name? Was it something like the word for forever? These Tahitian words were so hard to remember, but he wanted to remember. As they walked up to the Governor's house, he found himself talking about the language and its proliferation of vowels, that made it seem almost like the prattle of young children; naïve and melodic and open-hearted.

They called on the Governor and made their temporary farewells. Neither of them mentioned what they'd just witnessed. They returned to the Salamander and set off for Moorea, only a short sail across calm sea. Even on this small journey, they took up their habitual positions on deck, talking about the extraordinary distances islanders sailed – their scattered islands were as far flung across the South Pacific as if they were spread over the whole of Europe. They'd set off in the evening and navigate by the stars, for days or weeks. Roberts had discovered that islanders made sea journeys equivalent to the distance from London to Moscow almost on a whim, to visit relatives or make some ceremony. His elucidations lasted the duration of the whole crossing to Moorea. As soon as they arrived, Henry sent an invitation to Queen Pomare to dine on board that evening.

Throughout all these activities, Henry's mind kept returning to the sight of that woman, glossy with sweat, blood filling her ears, her legs twitching involuntarily.

Atea. That was it.

Queen Pomare arrived at the ship not long before sunset. As the Queen clambered aboard Roberts whispered to Henry.

‘Every inch the queen. They’re like children dressing up, aren’t they?’

‘They’re our guests,’ Henry replied, straight faced.

Yet he had to admit to himself that she was a sight. The queen sported a red velvet bonnet with a yellow satin shirt, while her neck and hands rattled with an abundance of French trinkets. Figured silk stockings and red shoes adorned her feet, which protruded under a green skirt hitched well above the ankle. Henry was reminded of music hall entertainers as she and her young lover paraded on deck with their motley retainers. All of them seemed happy to make their greetings in English, although they made various asides in their own tongue. Lengthy welcomes were exchanged; islanders could make a simple ‘good day’ into an extensive welcome speech covering the health of all involved, the season, the weather, the breeze and the particular sparkle on the waves that day.

Pomare brought with her quite a retinue including four of her children and four attendants, as well as her consort Pomaritani, Tamatoa, King of Raiatea, plus three other chiefs and their wives. The handsome Pomaritani hung behind the Queen with a shy smile. Her first husband, King Pomare, had gone to live on another island, leaving her as apparent ruler of Tahiti. It interested Henry that Tahitians seemed to find neither her separation from her husband nor her new consort disappointing or shameful. Pomaritani was at least twenty years her junior. Henry imagined Queen Victoria’s shock at such a state of affairs, but put the thought aside; this was a different court altogether. King Tamatoa cut a comical figure, wearing an old blue coat over his shirt, but neither pantaloons nor shoes nor stockings beneath. His officers’ faces were a picture as the party arrived. Her majesty was received with manned yards.

The Queen’s finery did seem to try her patience, however. Directly after the introductions, she pitched her bonnet onto the floor and kicked off her shoes. Midshipman

Calkin looked fit to burst as he watched her scratching her feet, but Henry fixed him with a look. Her right hand man was introduced as Sir Robert Peel, as he'd taken the name of his equivalent officer in the English government – such name-swapping was a Tahitian mark of friendship, but he could see it was amusing his young midshipmen. 'Sir Robert Peel' was small for a Tahitian, and hunchbacked, yet the queen's party treated him with apparent respect. Immediately, Henry wanted to make a portrait, wondering if the real Sir Robert Peel knew of the existence of his namesake.

Much was made of Henry's ability to speak Tahitian, however haltingly. Once the company had refreshed themselves with wine, the queen requested a private conversation with the Captain. As soon as they were alone, she wasted no time seeking Henry's help.

'If I go back to Tahiti I'll be a prisoner, although it may look as if I'm free. Can something be done for me? I'm a good friend to Queen Victoria.'

She proceeded to ruminate on the old friendship between Tahiti and England in a way that showed she hadn't given up hope of English intervention.

In response, Henry tried to be clear. 'I don't have soldiers to help you. When Queen Victoria's government and the French government agree what to do, perhaps I can do something. If we keep Tahiti, I'll help you get your island back. If the French have Tahiti, I don't have enough soldiers to fight them. But while we wait, I can talk with chiefs on other islands to see if they'll help – if you can do something together?'

Queen Pomare looked disconsolate. 'The chiefs don't like the French being there, but they won't fight unless Oui-ouis threaten their islands.' She drained her glass of claret at a gulp. 'They won't bring their war canoes to help me; I'll be left alone on Moorea.' She leaned towards him. 'The French have given me francs to stay here; but will they give me more?'

Did her interest lie more in her own position and finances than in the fate of her people? Henry was disappointed. Hadn't it occurred to her that if all the islands joined forces they might oust the French? She'd taken French bribes, leaving the Tahitian chiefs to fend for themselves. Surely a sovereign should have a sense of duty, not just dues?

‘I can’t say what the French will do,’ he replied. ‘All we can hope is our governments agree Tahiti can be British. Can you encourage the rebels? Perhaps if it was hard for the French your position would be stronger.’ He wanted to see if she’d considered any such action.

Pomare held out her glass for more claret. ‘What will Queen Victoria give me? She’s given me plates and pictures and mirrors and dresses...but she could give money, more than the francs Governor Bruat gave –’

Even if it were possible, Henry had his doubts about whether money given to Queen Pomare would be used to resist the French rather than to buy more fripperies.

He shook his head, trying to look regretful. ‘I have no money for you.’

There was silence as she digested this information, then Pomare stood up.

‘I don’t know about fighting,’ she said, tuning towards the door. ‘Let us eat.’

At least she had the imperious manner of a queen. Henry tried to understand her position as he led her back to the dinner table, wondering if his grasp of Tahitian was preventing him from understanding some subtleties. Perhaps she was choosing the path of least resistance, unwilling to inflict more bloodshed on her people – that was the most charitable interpretation he could put on it. Yet his gut feeling was simply that she had no taste for fighting the French, and was willing to step aside while they consolidated their power. His attempts to imply British support for more widespread resistance hadn’t generated even a flicker of interest.

The Queen cheered up when they returned to the table laid with heaps of fresh fruit, bread, roast meats and steaming bowls of stew. Henry had ordered the cook to prepare large quantities, as the islanders were known for their appetites. They hadn’t waited for the presence of their queen to begin. His guests were busy helping themselves from the heaped plates, using their hands rather than knives and forks, washing down almost every mouthful with gulps of wine. During the meal, everyone apart from Queen Pomare drank prodigious quantities. By the time they got to the toasts, Roberts’ eyes were slewing sideways as they drank to every native dignitary present, as well as Queen Victoria and her ministers. Dishes

on the table emptied almost as fast as the bottles. The guests ate everything in front of them and probably could have disposed of twice the quantity. Admiralty dinners were child's play compared to the performance of these people.

It was good to see his officers enjoy the occasion with gusto too. They danced and sang to amuse the queen, and gave her 'Rule Britannica' in full chorus. After dinner, Sir Robert Peel jiggled about with the midshipmen, and Calkin had an almost hysterical attack of coughing when Tamatoa picked up a tureen of rice pudding and slurped directly from the lip. After several glasses of port, Henry found himself asking Sir Robert Peel to sit for a portrait. Luckily, he agreed, drinking half a pint of brandy to celebrate the notion. Several other dignitaries volunteered to sit as well – although sculpture was well known to them, it appeared that pictorial art was new and enticing. Painting portraits would be useful both to pass the time in Moorea and to get to know the people.

After the fifth bottle of port had passed round, Henry was surprised to hear Tamatoa declare that he'd hand over the sovereignty of his own island to Queen Pomare should she feel obliged to give up Tahiti. Pomare's face showed neither surprise nor gratitude, but perhaps she distrusted drunken declarations. Henry knew that Tamatoa had given up his house to her when she arrived in Moorea, and that she and her various hangers on were supported by voluntary contribution. Pomare went on to declare her relief that all her children were provided for, as one had been adopted by the Queen of Huahine as her heir, another by Tapoa, King of Bora Bora, and a third by Tamatoa. Perhaps she wasn't as interested in retaining sovereignty as Bruat assumed. But Henry was impressed by the support offered to her by the other island monarchs; they seemed to behave like close relatives, giving up their homes, even adopting each other's children. He wondered if the royal families of Europe would be so generous.

When the queen eventually took her leave, a royal salute was fired, while the ship's company gave her three hearty cheers. Pomaritani managed to stagger to the boat supported by Pomare herself, complaining loudly about leaving. He curled up in the hull, muttering

under the dangling feet of Sir Robert Peel. Queen Pomare made her farewells while King Tamatoa vomited over the side.

As the boats slipped away, Old Groan the purser reported with some flourish that eighty two bottles of strong drink had been consumed.

Chapter 10

Atea lay in her hut in the days after the tattooing. Her face burned. Embers glowed from cheek to cheek. Miri went to the Oui-ouis at the garrison and got drink. They wouldn't trade the coconuts she took with her, so she had to kiss two of them, and let them feel her body to get one bottle. Maybe it was because she was pregnant that they didn't push for more. She couldn't wait to wash out her mouth with sea water from the gourd, standing spitting at the doorway before she came to sit by Atea, swilling brandy around her teeth.

'Those Oui-oui soldiers have a bad taste.'

'Anyone you don't want to kiss tastes bad.' Atea could hardly speak, her face was swollen so fat. 'Thank you.'

'You'd do the same for me.' Miri filled a coconut shell with brandy. 'I know this softens the hurting.'

Atea felt the fever growing. Even her eyes were hot and aching. The bottle reminded her of Temana.

'Here, drink.' Miri pushed her arm behind Atea's shoulders, holding the coconut shell to her lips. Brandy dribbled down Atea's chin. She shuddered at the burn of it. 'More,' said Miri. 'It'll help you sleep.'

Temana always slept after drinking the Oui-oui drinks, but it was a different kind of sleep. He slept long after the sun was up – and woke in a slow and miserable mood. Sucking brandy from the coconut shell, she held it against the inside of her lips, trying to make them numb. She swilled it around her aching teeth, coral rocks big against her tongue. Mouthful after mouthful, until she'd swallowed the whole cupful. Miri wiped her face.

'Maururu,' Atea murmured, the burn travelling to her stomach, warming her belly and chest.

'You need to sleep, to let the fever go through you,' said Miri, putting her hand to Atea's forehead. 'Ah hia, you're hot. Lie still and rest.'

Miri wiped Atea's hands and arms with sea water. Without touching the wounds, Miri dabbed at the rest of her face, wiped the hair at her temples, cleaned the dried blood out of her ears. The water was cool. Maururu. Atea felt how lucky she was to have such a friend.

Together they lay in the dark, Miri on the mat beside her. Atea's heart beat in her face, throbbing in her lips and cheeks. Both of them were listening for Temana, but they wouldn't say his name.

'His family have made a spirit house,' said Miri quietly. 'They put him there while you were in the prison.'

'Did they make it well?'

'It's a fine one. Some cousins came back from the mountain to help. Fighting Ouis could wait, they said. They made the rituals. For a while they talked about burning this hut to stop his spirit lingering, but we said let the kahuna clean it instead with chanting.'

Atea lay still, feeling the shock in her body. They'd almost burnt her home. Maybe it would be better. They didn't want Temana to come back as a bad ghost - tupapa'u. Dead people can linger in their old places, being angry, causing trouble.

'They could burn it,' she murmured. 'He built it with them.' Flames licked at her lips.

'They don't need to. The priests decided – they talked with his cousins.'

'Maybe –'

'Stop talking now. They decided.'

They looked up towards the roof in the darkness. Atea remembered Temana and his cousins weaving the pandanus leaves to make the roof beautiful. Moonlight gleamed through the open doorway. They'd sung songs as they worked together. She was pregnant, sitting in the shade watching. Atea's heart beat and beat in her face, talking to Temana saying sorry, sorry, sorry. Maururu. Maururu. Maururu.

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Next morning, Atea was awake when the missionaries' cocks began to crow. It was dark.

Miri felt her forehead.

‘Ah hia, you’re still so hot.’

Instead of going to the stream, they walked down to the sea and bathed her wounds.

Atea sat in the shallows, splashing her face, water shocking and sizzling on her skin. Light on the waves was so bright it hurt her eyes. Salt stung the cuts on her face. Miri scooped handfuls over Atea’s head until she began to cool down. Two rays came and swam nearby – perhaps they smelt the blood. Although Miri had nothing to feed them, they stayed close. Atea pushed her burning face under the water and looked at them swimming, patterns of sunlight and wave rippling along their backs, pretty as their gently rippling sides. Temana had a ray tattooed on his back, a bigger tattoo than hers. He’d borne it bravely. Miri reached down through the water and pulled her up.

‘Don’t. Your cuts need to dry. Don’t keep your face under.’

Miri kept looking towards the reef. Perhaps she was afraid sharks might come too. The rays came closer, nosing at their hands. Their silent presence gave Atea comfort as she washed herself all over. She washed Vetea out of her.

As they walked back, the salt dried on her face in the sunlight, pinching and stinging. She tried to walk smoothly, without jolting her swollen face. When they got back she had to lie down again, tired out.

‘I’m an old woman now,’ she said.

Her mouth moved more easily after bathing; her lip was not so fat. But as the crusts on her cuts slowly dried her skin felt as if it was thickening, tightening. If she turned her eyes from side to side they ached in their sockets, so she closed them.

‘Hauata could come back - look after you,’ Miri suggested. ‘We could send for her.’

Her daughter’s name made Atea’s eyes flick open.

‘Hauata? No!’ She didn’t want Hauata to see her like this. She’d sent her away so she didn’t have to see the pain her father caused. Now it was worse than before; more pain,

grief, fever. Sometimes people died after tattooing. She must not die; she must see Hauata again. Just for now, let Hauata be where she was in Raiatea, safe.

‘I don’t want her to see me. It’s hard for her already. Later. When she wants to see me.’

Miri had told her that Herenui had gone to tell them in Raiatea - he fetched the cousins to build the spirit house. Hauata must know Temana was dead – what had Herenui said? Atea closed her eyes: she’d go later, when her face was healed, when she was ready. Now she didn’t have any strength. She’d killed Hauata’s father; it sat in her chest like a lump of black coral. The thought of Hauata knowing made her retch around the weight of it.

Miri filled a coco shell with brandy.

‘Hauata will wait. Maybe you’re right – maybe it’s better for her there.’ She held the shell to Atea’s mouth. ‘Drink.’

Atea turned her face away. Hauata must hate her.

‘Drink. Drink!’

Miri pushed the cup against her lip and Atea sucked it in, as if she was someone else, shuddering at the taste, too far away to care. She was out on the ocean, bobbing in a canoe. The throbbing pain across her face was the canoe bouncing with the waves. The heat that prickled her skin was the sun glaring down, salt drying. Miri pounded arrowroot in a wooden bowl. The pounding was the slap of a paddle in the sea, slap-suck, slap-suck, slap-suck as the paddle dipped in and out. The paddle stopped and someone touched her arm.

‘Here, eat some.’ Miri offered the pale paste on her finger.

Atea pushed Miri’s hand away.

The gourd sloshed as Miri mixed water into the paste. She slopped some into a coconut shell and held it to Atea’s lips.

‘I can’t.’

Determined, Miri went out and gathered coconuts. Atea could hear her hacking at them. Their three eyes peeping. Miri sticking her knife in the eyes, letting the milk out. The sun was getting higher, hotter. Flies settled on Atea’s face, walking about on the crusts

where her beauty used to be. She was too weary to wave them away. Miri came back with coco milk in a gourd. The smell of it filled the hut as she mixed the arrowroot with coco milk, then offered it again.

‘Try it now. It’s easier to swallow. It’s better with the coco milk.’

Miri drank some herself, cooing with pleasure to show Atea as if she was a baby. The smell was sweet and thin. Thirst nagged at her throat, but Atea was afraid to open her mouth and break the crusts hardening above her lip. The thought of it made her feel sick, but Miri held her up with her strong arms, held the cup at her mouth. The smell squeezed at her stomach. To please her friend, she tried sucking a few mouthfuls through her teeth.

‘Just let me lie down, now, e?’

Miri frowned. ‘I’m going to talk with Nunui. You need healing.’

‘No,’ said Atea. ‘This is my punishment. Don’t ask them. Please, don’t.’

‘But you’re so hot – I can’t sit here doing nothing.’

It was wrong to let someone suffer alone. Usually relatives would come, but no one had been punished like this before. Atea wanted to let the popa’s punishment work through her without help, but it was too hard to speak it all. It all felt the wrong shape.

‘You’re not doing nothing. You’re helping, being with me. Let it burn through – maybe it will make me clean.’

‘Aue.’ Miri sighed, wetted a cloth, and wiped at the sweat on Atea’s forehead. ‘I’ll wait. I’ll do some lomi lomi just for now. But if the fever isn’t gone tomorrow, I’ll fetch Nunui.’

Atea closed her eyes and let her body sink into the mat.

‘Maururu.’

The breeze coming in through the doorway breathed orange and red across her skin. She was an ember.

Her face was burning. All her beauty was burning away.

Miri began the lomi lomi. To protect Atea's wounds, first she laid leaves and a piece of fresh tapa cloth under her face. She made the flying dance before she began – Atea listened to her feet, back and forth, back and forth. Miri was chanting, her arms floating up like wings then down, swirling the air around the hut. The warm smell of monoi filled the hut as Miri oiled her own arms and hands. When she'd finished, Miri knelt down and rubbed monoi oil on her, then rolled her over and oiled all of her back and legs, her hands firm and resolute, sliding easily with all the oil. Atea let go to trust, blessed by the comforting slide of hands on her body, soothing her, strengthening her. When she was well, then she could go to Hauata. When she was strong enough, when the punishment had burned through her.

Miri took Atea's foot in her hands. She began rubbing the sole, around and around, pushing hard into the arch, the heel of her palm sliding smoothly. Miri loved to do lomi lomi; Atea could feel the love in her hands. For a long while she massaged her sole, around and around, then she placed it on her shoulder and began to sweep her hands down along the length of her leg, from the ankle travelling along her calf and thigh, onto her body, then stroking back down the length of her leg with a skilful long movement, over and over, again and again. Atea's legs became heavy. Hauata was far away in Raiatea.

Miri worked down through the muscles, down to the bone. What would Temana's people tell Hauata? Would she ever want to see her mother again? Miri pushed her forearms up Atea's body in one long sweep – across, into, through the flesh, stroking up her hips, around her shoulders and down her back again, making one long, deep, liquid stroke each time.

The sun rose higher above the hut as Miri worked, heat creaking the walls, softening their flesh. Atea gave in to the rhythm of Miri's movements, a tide rolling over and over, warmth pouring through her arms, streaming through her fingers, releasing the fever. Miri blew gusts of *ha* breath as she worked, blowing away the aches, the longing, the fear. Atea's face burned, her body melted, and the tide rolled along, rolled along. She let go into the rhythm, stroke after stroke. She had to get well, get strong. Again and again Miri pushed her weight across Atea's body, oil and force and Miri's intention melting her fears, stroking,

stroking, get well, get well, just for now, just for now. Miri knew her fears about Hauata far away in Raiatea.

Atea drifted on the waves of touch, remembering the day Hauata came. It was her second labour, and as soon as she woke Temana, he picked up the digging stick and his knife, bleary eyed and serious. He carried the water gourd and a mat as they walked to the forest. It was dawn and te-te birds were crying out in the distance as her pains grew stronger. They went to a mape tree, and rolled out the mat so she could kneel down. It was a longer labour than the first one. Temana put his hands on her, squatting behind her, holding her. She was so afraid then; trying and trying to get the baby out and wondering would this one be dead too? All through the morning she was releasing her fears with her breath, releasing the fear of its limbs flopping and its face never opening into a newborn cry, then releasing her hopes for a living baby that waved its arms and wriggled at meeting the air. All day she was in the rhythm of the waves, pushing and resting, pushing and resting. Releasing and releasing until she was in courage, until her strength and body gathered together instead of leaking away in fear. From the early morning until the afternoon heat, she pushed more and more strongly. At last, at last the baby spluttered and cried in Temana's hands. A girl, with huge eyes.

Temana was kneeling, holding her out before him. He laid her down on the bark cloth they had ready. She looked dark on the creamy bark, shadows shifting across her belly and the cord. Bending forwards, Temana put his thumbs to her throat. The baby struggled, wriggling. Terror sharp as an eel bite raced through her as she reached towards him. The cord was still uncut, but she didn't want to grab. She didn't want his thumbs to press.

'No!' she cried. 'No, Temana. I want her!'

He looked round. His hands were still on the baby.

'She's the second baby. She must be pouara.' He frowned as he spoke.

'No, she's the first, the first! Taaroa says we can keep her. The other one died. Let me have her – give her to me!'

On her knees, she struggled to get to the baby, afraid to pull at his arms. He knew they could keep her – what was he doing?

Temana didn't move. 'But - a girl. I'll have to wait so long –'

'Yes. You'll have to wait.' Atea held out her arms. As she spoke she put the strength of the shark into her throat. 'Give her to me.'

He looked back at her.

Quietly, she spoke again. '*Give her to me.*'

She couldn't fight him, but she could make him understand.

'*Give her to me.*'

He bowed his head. At last he let her take the baby, pressing his thumbs against each other, instead of the baby's throat. Atea held her close, turning her shoulder towards her husband. Big eyes looked out of a wrinkled face; beautiful eyes, trusting her. Hauata. As Temana cut the cord, she told him the baby's name, but he didn't answer. He cleaned his knife, pushing it deep into the ground.

Chapter 11

In the following days on Moorea, Henry made several excursions around the island, painting landscapes and people. Family groups posed with their canoes, which were almost part of the family, so had to be included. People were eager to have their portraits painted, and Henry learned more of his subjects and their language. As he painted and conversed, he grew more comfortable in the native tongue, which seemed much the same from island to island with small variations. He was realistic about the small degree of his artistic ability, yet the natives treated his watercolours as if they were almost magical.

Queen Pomare didn't want to be painted, but Henry had a great deal of amusement painting King Tamatoa paddling in the shallows in a striped shirt, a fat cigar gripped between his teeth. Although he was king of Raiatea, the island that was considered the spiritual mother for all others in the area, Tamatoa was homely and amicable. With his rolled up trousers, he reminded Henry of a rotund and jocular winkle-picker. Henry tried to quiz him on the subject of Queen Pomare.

'It's very kind of you to give Queen Pomare your house while she is here – do you think she misses Tahiti very much?'

'It is her home. Of course she loves Tahiti.' Tamatoa blew out a cloud of smoke with clear satisfaction. 'But I hope she can be happy living on another island.'

'Do you believe she wants to fight the French?'

Tamatoa frowned. 'How can she? They have more soldiers.'

'I am told there are many men in the mountain camp who can fight?'

'They're not her men.'

'Are they not all Tahitian?' Henry felt foolish - perhaps there were already Mooreans and Raiatians fighting for Tahiti.

Tamatoa waded further out, swishing water around his ankles. 'Most of them are Tahitian men, but they may be loyal to other chiefs.' He turned to look at Henry. 'You

papa'a call me King, but I'm a chief among chiefs. My people honour me with their respect, and I talk *with* other chiefs. I don't tell them what to do. You call Pomare Queen, and she is a good Queen – and she is also a chief among chiefs.'

Henry stopped dabbing with his paintbrush. 'Are you saying that she doesn't control the men in the camp on the mountain?'

Again, Tamatoa sucked on his cigar. 'The men fighting in Tahiti don't want French soldiers there, so they fight them. Pomare is not a warrior, but she knows that if you throw fish into the mouth of a shark, it will still be hungry the next day.'

'So there's no point in fighting the French – she can't win.'

'Or the British, perhaps.' Tamatoa turned back and looked at the waves. 'How many have died already in Tahiti?' The cloud of smoke he blew out drifted over the rippling sea, thinning to nothing. 'So many.'

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During his stay in Moorea Henry was invited to feast after feast in the evenings, while during the day he painted, swam, rode around the island and met with local chiefs. At every gathering he was introduced to beautiful women - sometimes even the wives of the chiefs made their interest clear, inviting him to walk along the beach at sunset, an invitation he was told was likely to prove more intimate than walking.

But he held fast to Cook's advice; a celibate captain was an example to his men. Nonetheless, he couldn't help admiring the many charms of such beguiling women; their teeth were so clean and white, their smiles so inviting, their eyes so playful. He grew used to the sight of their broad, bare feet, and became more adept at refusing their favours as playfully as they were offered.

One particular woman called Poerava stationed herself by his side the first time he dined with Tamatoa. Her approach was more subtle than some. She was watchful, filling his cup with cava, picking a stray moth out of his hair, brushing sand from his coat. As they ate,

she explained the music played on the nose flute, and the games he'd seen the islanders playing that day, wrestling and spear-throwing. When it was time to leave, her hand crept onto his arm.

'Shall I walk with you to your boat?' Her smile was conspiratorial. As she leaned close, Henry could smell the sweet, enticing scent of monoi. Her fingers brushed his forearm.

'Thank you for your kindness, but I'll walk with my men. I must be sure they get back safely.' He wondered if it was possible to sound pompous in Tahitian; he certainly felt it.

'Women are danger?'

He smiled. 'I'm afraid of your many powers...'

Poerava laughed, kissed his cheek and left. She didn't seem piqued.

As he said his farewells to the assembled party, Henry steered his thoughts away from the possibilities of a night with Poerava, reminding himself of his father's decline. Even Elizabeth had overcome her reluctance to speak of their father's illness when Henry was first sent to sea. Scarlet with shame at having to speak such degradations aloud, she'd begged him to refrain from temptations of the flesh. Henry had sworn he'd never do as their father had. He only had to remember the drool on his father's chin as his syphilis progressed to its latter stages.

Each night in Moorea he returned to his ship, fearing that if he agreed to sleep on shore he might have to make more awkward refusals. He suspected that it was something of a joke among the local women to proposition him, knowing he would refuse. Age and marital status appeared to make no difference to potential advances; some of the matrons were as flirtatious as the younger women, and their husbands appeared to have no objection. It was both intriguing and confusing. Henry began to understand the erotic adventures of Joseph Banks – there was no need to seek out women, they presented themselves without shame, offering themselves apparently at their own whim.

As on Tahiti, one iron nail usually secured a woman's favours. The nail was given to her husband or father to make fish hooks. Henry had rationed the stores of nails in the hold, but as the weeks progressed he ordered the marines to guard the nail barrels day and night, so they set up a never-ending card game on top of one barrel. Old Groan the purser berated the sailors that these stocks had to last the year, and made regular checks on the fabric of the ship - there were tales of men taking nails from the hulls of other vessels, careless of compromising the voyage home. Nails soon acquired a higher value than rum in the ship's internal economy.

After almost ten days in Moorea, they took leave of the queen and her entourage, and sailed back to Tahiti. As he stood on deck enjoying the morning breeze, Henry remembered the Dr Johnson who was living near Pape'ete, one of his early visitors to the Salamander. He'd just finished reading Johnson's 'Life', and found it most entertaining – some fresh conversation in English would be a welcome change to his laborious Tahitian, and Johnson might prove a useful source of local information. As soon as they weighed anchor near Pape'ete, he sent a note asking Johnson to dine on board. Johnson declined the dinner, but suggested riding to a waterfall the next day. Henry was far more interested in an outing than a dinner, and instructed Roberts to field any visitors, and to be vigilant about visiting canoes, especially those containing women.

The next day Henry set off to meet the doctor in good spirits. At the hotel he hired a horse to ride to Johnson's place, a neat and pretty house thatched in Tahitian style not far outside the main village. An equally neat and pretty girl came out of the house to greet him.

'I am Tehani.'

With her bare feet and innocent smile, she struck him as childlike. She was wearing a flower behind her ear, indicating she had a lover. Henry presumed the lover was Johnson, and he felt uncomfortable – she looked no more than fifteen, while Johnson was perhaps in his late forties.

'Johnson is getting his horse, Tapitane. Some water?' The girl handed him a gourd, smiling as if he were a beloved friend.

Henry dismounted and bowed; he didn't want to tower above her.

'Thankyou – maururu.'

Tehani smiled again when he used the Tahitian word. Henry wondered if he was correct about her age – she seemed a very confident hostess. She must be Johnson's consort. It would be impolite to ask, but he felt disappointed. At home a man might select a youthful wife, but not usually so very young, nor quite so different in class and education.

'They're making tapa at the waterfall.' Tehani said. 'My mother Miri is there.'

Miri. Henry remembered the name; the pregnant woman on the path to Bruat's. Henry could discern some likeness in Tehani's eyes and strong eyebrows, and he felt suddenly ashamed as he recalled Miri bent over her bleeding, twitching friend as she was tattooed. He'd done nothing to help.

'Ah yes – you look like your mother. I'm sorry I couldn't help her friend – Atea - how is she?'

Surely Miri would have reported her desperate attempt to get him to help, and his lack of response. He studied Tehani's face, but there was no trace of resentment, just a sunny openness. Surprisingly, she seemed prepared to like him.

'My mother is well, and Atea is almost well. Her face is healing.' She paused. 'We know you tried.'

Henry bowed his head.

'I did nothing. The governor decided. Your mother is a good friend.'

Somehow he couldn't imagine having such a conversation with an English girl of such tender years. She didn't appear to be judging him - rather, she was discussing what had happened as if it couldn't be helped. Not for the first time, he felt as if there was something he didn't understand in the way Tahitians worked. Was their apparent acceptance really naivety, or a double bluff?

Tehani smiled back. At the same moment, Johnson trotted into view and Tehani turned to watch him approach. The expression of happiness on her face intensified as she watched him. Johnson winked at her, then turned an affable grin on Henry. Clearly, there

was genuine affection between the two. While the men greeted each other, Tehani fetched a picnic from the house and packed it into Johnson's saddlebag, along with water and a couple of pareos.

'In case we want to bathe,' said Johnson, raising his eyebrows. 'The falls are most refreshing, and there may be a number of nymphs in attendance...'

He kissed Tehani goodbye so tenderly - and thoroughly - that Henry had to lean down to check his mount's girth.

Soon they were galloping along the shore at a glorious pace under a blazing blue sky. Henry was glad to be out of the confines of the ship, away from crew and the endless diplomatic callers. The spray from the sea and the breeze on his skin were a welcome change from lugubrious warmth. Lush green hills rose up alongside the beach and after a few miles they turned into the forest itself. As they made their way through vegetation that became more and more luxuriant, Johnson pointed out different varieties of breadfruit tree, arrowroot plants, vi and various botanical curiosities. After a while they dismounted to negotiate the profusion of plant life, and the freshness of the beach was replaced with clinging humidity. An entourage of mosquitoes clung to Henry's sweating face and arms, and no amount of swatting deterred them.

'Tehani can give you a potion for the bites later – they use coconut milk or something to soothe – looks as if you'll need it.' Johnson shrugged. 'They don't seem to bother me – maybe because I drink so much coco milk...'

Henry pulled his mare, urging her on in the hope of getting out of the forest sooner. 'How far to the waterfall?'

'Not too much further. Take it easy, my friend, the water nymphs will probably be there all day. Hurrying only makes it stickier. You may have noticed how Tahitians walk as if there's no hurry at all – they'd amble through this shrubbery as if it were a meadow. It's quite deliberate; they know this climate.'

Henry mopped his face. 'They've obviously got the sense not to come in here much.' There were no well trodden paths in evidence.

‘I suppose they don’t need to, except to gather vi and other foods. But now the men are at the camp, there are ‘picnics’ far more often than there used to be.’

‘Women supplying the rebels with food?’

‘Exactly.’ Johnson stopped, pointing to a huge grey tree with wide, flared flanges supporting its trunk at the base, like the flying buttresses of a cathedral. ‘Let’s take a breather over there. It’s a mape tree – Tahitian chestnut – and those roots can be as comfortable as an armchair, if you find one to fit your back.’

They each selected a buttress to lean against, and sat down to rest. Johnson opened the saddlebag and passed Henry water and parcels of food wrapped in leaves. Henry gulped the warm water and opened a leafy package. What looked like tuna lay within, pink against the green leaf. Was he expected to eat raw fish? Johnson was already chewing. After sniffing the fish, Henry took a tentative nibble. It was sweet and tender. It was long time since breakfast, and Eliza always said hunger was the best sauce. The lumps of raw tuna were steeped in coconut milk, and tasted far better than expected.

The men sat in silence as they chewed. The forest was peaceful apart from the mosquitoes, which Henry could feel attacking even his scalp.

‘I’ve never seen Tahitians with bites – have you?’

‘They use coconut oil or juice, but I’m not sure how – as I said, the wee blighters don’t bother me anyway.’ Johnson settled back against the mape. ‘It’s good to watch what they do – Tahitians that is, not mosquitoes. I try to go about my business like an islander – walk slowly, rest in the middle of the day, save your exertions for early morning...’ Johnson opened another package. ‘As far as I can make out, there are excellent reasons for everything they do. This is their place – they’ve been here for hundreds of years, after all.’

‘They’re lucky there are so few demands on them. Fruit either falls from the trees, or they climb up and gather it – idyllic, I can see that, but we have rather more to be getting on with.’

Johnson laughed. ‘Life may seem easy here at first glance, but being with Tahitians is often an illuminating experience...there’s far more going on than you might think. They

may be illiterate, but they have great deal of knowledge – and skills that aren't always apparent.'

'What about intellectual stimulation? Don't you ever get bored? And what about books – do you have enough to read?'

As soon as he'd spoken, Henry realised he might offend, thinking of Johnson's life at home with Tehani. He checked Johnson's profile, relieved that he seemed unperturbed.

'You've no idea how complex their philosophies are - as well as simple.' Johnson shrugged. 'I don't mean to be condescending - you couldn't know; much of it's kept secret. Even before the missionaries came, the knowledge of kahunas was secret; it takes years – even lifetimes - to learn. It seems not many know it now – or they pretend not to; perhaps feigning ignorance is a good way to avoid prying and interference. I didn't have any idea when I first came.'

'What are these philosophies?'

'I don't know that I can say with any accuracy. Tehani tells me things – wise and surprising things, and she's only young... It's hard to imagine what the older people may know – occasionally I've tried to ask, and their answers are cryptic.'

Slightly embarrassed by Johnson's reference to Tehani's youth, Henry slapped at mosquitoes as he waited for Johnson to continue.

'It seems that they work with thought as a physical reality. It's remarkably effective, if you can bring yourself to try it – to trust it...' Johnson leaned his head back against the mape. 'It's hard to talk about without seeming a complete ass. Tahitians do what they feel. Not what they *should* do – there's no 'should' in Tahitian. It's harder than it sounds to do exactly what you feel like doing...and that includes everything; working, walking, making love, everything.' He shrugged. 'It's clean, and honest. Not what we're used to. Often we're doing what we think we should be doing; we have our minds telling us all sorts of things. I think the Tahitian way is to feel more in the body, to relax and feel what the body wants to do.'

In the silence that followed, Henry reflected that duty seemed to rule much of his life. Simply doing what he felt would be dangerous. He'd allowed his feelings for Grace to lead his actions – and that had ended in disaster. He remembered standing beside her in the library while his mother berated them, his protests useless, Grace bowed and weeping. His insistence that they wanted to marry was derided, his mother's face congested with fury. 'My only son to marry a *servant*? Do I not have enough to bear?' Elizabeth had pleaded Grace's good family, her schoolteacher father, her straightened circumstances, but mother waved all that away. 'No decent woman would behave the way she has!' In retrospect, it was easy to see why self control was so important to his mother – her life had been ruined by her husband's lack of it.

Johnson handed him a handful of peeled nuts. 'Mape – from this tree.' He pointed upwards. 'Quite good really, a bit like boiled chestnuts.' He stretched and yawned. 'For myself, I've noticed how hard it is simply to feel what I want to do and do it – often I'm inclined to do something because I think I should...'

'Do you practise medicine?' Henry imagined that a doctor would feel obligated to treat sickness whether or not he was in the mood.

Johnson shrugged. 'Well, people here have their own way of treating illness, and I try to fit around that...I've realised that mostly I just give out powders to relieve certain symptoms, while the native healers tend to go to the heart of the problem. And the heart is often the problem, is it not? I tinker, while the kahunas resolve... They don't really need me.' He smiled ruefully. 'But I do thank Heavens for the naval post! I enjoy news from home, I have to admit. You're right about books - reading passes the time admirably. Did you bring any newspapers, or journals?'

'Not many, but you can have whatever I've got. I've just finished the 'Life' of your namesake – have you read it?'

'I've seen the dictionary – humorous, if a little dour – but I'd be very glad of any book at all. I must've read every blasted book on the island, even Pastor Coe's resolutely tedious sermons.'

Henry laughed. 'I imagine Dr Johnson is more entertaining than Coe, if not so beneficial for the soul. I read ten volumes on the voyage here without a moment's weariness. He has an extraordinary talent for condensing a volume's worth of venom into one crushing sentence - but I do wonder if I'd enjoy his company in the flesh.'

'I'll be thankful to have the wicked tome, albeit without its author; after all, I came here partly to escape uncongenial company – and so far seem to have had some success.'

Henry smiled. 'So you're not a regular guest at Bruat's table?'

Johnson grinned back. 'Ha! He invited me once, and once only. It seems I was triumphantly dull.'

'Bravo. How did you manage that?'

'I spent much of the evening enumerating the species of trees that grow here, their form, habits and various native uses - and when Bruat attempted to divert my exhaustive treatise, I simply persisted. Once I'd run short of trees, I moved onto edible plants. Bruat communed with the wine as I held forth, and once he was truly glassy eyed, I turned my attentions to Madame, entertaining her with extensive descriptions of the many fascinating aspects of hibiscus – its decorative uses in garlands for the hair and the home, its medicinal properties and value as a refreshing tisane. Preparation of such a tisane, etcetera... Strangely, she appeared to lack interest in hibiscus, so I embarked on a discussion of coconuts and the many uses thereof. I was just getting into my stride on that rich subject when, to my disappointment, both Madame and Monsieur became unaccountably weary and declared they had to retire...'

Henry laughed. 'Excellent! I'll bear your technique in mind.'

'I'd rather not take part in social niceties,' Johnson said, getting to his feet, 'and these mosquitoes are making a terrible meal of you. Let's move on.'

They rode for several miles, leaving the mosquitoes behind as they rose higher up the wooded hillside. Conversation diminished as they negotiated slopes that were tricky for the horses. Apart from sounds of their horses, and the occasional chirp of crickets, the forest was silent, eerie. Johnson got out his knife and leaned from his saddle to cut a branch from a

bush. Henry took the lead as Johnson lingered, sawing at the slim branch with his inadequate knife. Henry glanced behind to see Johnson trimming it to a switch as their steeds lumbered towards a rocky outcrop.

‘A fly whisk?’ Henry asked.

Johnson shook his head. ‘Just being cautious.’ He pulled out his once white handkerchief and tied it to the switch. ‘We’re nearly there.’

As they passed the rocks, Henry caught a flash of white as Johnson raised the switch behind him. A white flag. Surrender? What was going on? At that moment their horses cleared the outcrop, and Henry was astonished to see a huge, orderly camp spread out before them.

Johnson had brought him to the rebels.

Dozens of native huts occupied a small plateau; a perfect spot to defend - the vegetation around had been cleared to allow a clear view. There was only one narrow, winding approach – the one they were on - in full view of the hundreds of men he could see ranged about the camp. Already men were gathering near the end of the path, perhaps only a hundred yards away. There was no means of escape with Johnson blocking the path behind him.

‘What the devil are you playing at?’ He hissed back to Johnson, his heart thudding. Was he about to be made captive?

‘I’ve heard that the chiefs want talk with you. I thought you might like the opportunity to meet them.’ Johnson was relaxed. ‘Don’t worry – they don’t bite.’

‘You could have warned me!’

Johnson grinned and shrugged. ‘Would you have come?’

Henry glared ahead. Most likely he would, but he would have liked to feel more prepared. Big open-sided huts were spilling out dozens of men, some armed with clubs. There were only men; everywhere he looked, warriors were coming towards them. He glanced behind, considering escape, but about twenty tall, muscled warriors had appeared behind them by the rocks. Ahead of them another thirty or so were already on the pathway,

tall leafy plumes nodding above a bristle of guns. Each gun was pointing towards them. His steed whinnied as if voicing his own nerves. He was surprised to see so many guns.

If he could get out of here alive, Henry thought grimly, here was useful information. The approach they were making was well defended – one would be fighting uphill, clearly visible and within range of gunfire from much of the camp. The Tahitians had chosen their position well. He glanced around. Over on the other side of the huts might be a better point for attack, perhaps allowing a greater element of surprise. It looked as if the contours of the hill over there offered a wider target area than the restricted path they were using. All this could be valuable if the British eventually did have to deal with the rebels, but he could see it wouldn't be easy. Everywhere was clean and organised. The men almost gleamed with strength. They glared at him with determination. Now he understood Bruat's weariness. Fighting these troops - he had to recognise that they were troops – was not as simple as the officials at home imagined. Cannon and ranks of infantry would be no use up here. The forest was the Tahitians' best ally – no wonder they chose to fight the French in small sorties, using surprise and geography against them.

Waving his pathetic flag, Johnson called out. 'Ia orana!'

Producing a clenched smile, Henry growled at Johnson. 'I hope you know what you're doing'. They were within range of the rifles. He decided to echo Johnson's greeting. 'Ia orana!'

'Keep your hands on your reins and look at them. They know me,' Johnson said in a low murmur. 'Ia orana!' He called out again.

There was no sign of them 'knowing' Johnson. Another dozen young men with hefty clubs were lining up behind the rifles, presumably in case mere shot wasn't enough to finish them off, thought Henry. Sweat soaked across his back. Damn the blithe doctor, he thought, sitting up straighter, hoping his uniform might distinguish him as British, not French. Was he going to die sweating in his dusty jacket? Did they still eat people?

He could see faces and tattoos – but he didn't recognise any of the men. The sound of metal rasped on rock as a rifle was laid on a boulder beside the path. Henry felt it between his teeth. The Tahitian faces before them were as dispassionate as stones.

At last, a man with a luxuriant palm head dress called back to them.

'Ia orana!'

He stepped forward. He was taller than the other men; at least six foot six, Henry guessed. A word his father used to use long ago, before his illness, popped into Henry's head; integrity. The movements of the man before them were in perfect harmony with the calm expression on his face. It was clear who had the power here.

'That's Moana,' Johnson said. 'A chief from the other side of the island. Dismount.'

They dismounted and walked their horses forward. Henry drew some reassurance from Johnson's manner; he didn't seem at all nervous – rather as if he were among familiars. As he and Johnson got closer, several warriors stepped forward, flipping their guns back onto their shoulders as lightly as if they were made of balsa. That was a small relief; apparently they were being treated as friends.

Moana gestured towards a nearby hut. It was obvious he was a chief from his proud bearing and plentiful tattoos. Henry's legs were stiff with tension, his body primed to fight. Johnson greeted Moana, introducing Henry as the English Tapitane. Men crowded around, all taller than Henry and Johnson. Their teeth shone in their tattooed faces. Henry could smell sweat and the aromas from their leafy garlands. At least they were smiling.

More than anything, they were interested in Johnson's saddlebags. These were lifted from the horse's back and carried like treasure to the indicated hut. Henry walked the twenty yards to the hut taking stock of the camp around him. There was a mountain stream for water and washing – crucial for the comfort of any Tahitian. There were more than fifty thatched huts, and bare chested men everywhere, armed and unarmed – hundreds of them, perhaps as many as a thousand. It was both amazing and intimidating. Guns and clubs were within reach of every hand, if not already in them. Apart from leaping off a precipice, escape

routes were not apparent. Johnson and Moana sat down in the shade under the thatched roof, beckoning to Henry to do the same.

Two more men came in and introduced themselves as Ra'anui and Arenui, chiefs. They investigated the saddlebags as the introductions were made, unwrapping parcels of fish and po'ee and eating as they spoke. There were piles of food spread out on leaves already. Without the usual fulsome Tahitian welcomes, they got straight to the point by asking how Henry could help them. Taken aback, he asked them how many men they had, but the answer was vague.

'Many. We won't give up our island to the Oui-ouis,' Moana stated, fixing him with a cool gaze. He obviously wasn't about to give away such useful information.

'I don't know what I can do for you,' Henry said. 'This camp is in a good place – but are there any places that aren't so strong – ways that soldiers can come?' Frustrated at his own clumsiness, he kicked himself for the transparency of his enquiry - he couldn't think of a more subtle way to put it.

Moana stared back without a flicker.

'We keep watch. The Oui-ouis make a lot of noise, they don't fight well in the forest.' Moana stopped as if to let this sink in. They planned to fight any approach long before it reached the camp. The two other chiefs chuckled in support of this statement. They appeared to regard the French with the same derisory pity that Bruat exhibited towards Tahitians. 'We knew you were coming long ago.'

Arenui waved his arm majestically over the feast of breadfruit, dried fish and more breadfruit. Obviously they'd had plenty of time to prepare.

Henry nodded. Of course they'd have men on reconnaissance. 'We thank you for your kindness – most delicious.' He picked up a chunk of breadfruit as he spoke. 'It looks as if you can stay up here for a long time – your huts are strong, and this is a good place, but what about food?' Feeding a thousand Tahitian appetites couldn't be easy on top of a mountain, he thought as he chewed.

Arenui answered that not all of them were there all the time; they came and joined in skirmishes and raids, then left to rejoin their families. Women and returning men brought food. Perhaps the French had considered siege, but that would be difficult – there weren't enough French soldiers for that.

'You have weapons, and men. You could help us.' A flake of fish clung to Ra'anui's lip as he spoke.

Henry spread his hands before him. 'I'm sorry – I can't give you guns - or men – Queen Victoria doesn't want us to fight – with you or the French. She wants me to watch Governor Bruat, to see what he does. That's why I am here. Only to watch. I have guns for my men only.'

This statement was met with quizzical looks. 'To see what he does? Are you not a Tapitane – a chief? If you don't like Oui-ouis, why don't you fight them?'

Henry watched handfuls of fish disappearing behind the chiefs' great white teeth. He knew they negotiated with each other, so they should be able to understand diplomatic negotiations between nations. Maybe it was the longevity of it all that bemused them.

'We're here to watch only. My Queen and her chiefs are talking with the French King – they must decide what to do. It takes a long time for them to talk, I know, but they talk until it is decided. Even if I don't like the Oui-ouis I can't fight on my own. If my Queen wants to go to war, then I can fight.'

'You are a soldier?' Moana asked. 'You are a Tapitane?'

'A man must fight,' frowned Ra'anui, 'or he's not a man. We are men, and we are chiefs. We fight, and we lead our men. Have you fought in battles?'

Henry pressed his lips together. Actually, he'd had no need to fight any battles yet, but that wasn't something he had to justify to them.

'My orders are to watch the French,' he repeated, attempting the same calm that he saw in Moana's face.

'Once there was a woman dressed as a man on one of the Oui-oui ships,' Arenui said. 'It was the cook. The Oui-ouis didn't know, but we knew as soon as she came off the

ship. We were surprised, because you don't bring women on your ships. When they took off the cook's clothes, they found she was a woman pretending to be a man.'

Johnson laughed. Not the most helpful intervention – Henry felt piqued. So they thought he was a woman if he wasn't prepared to fight. Three pairs of brown eyes were trained on him, waiting. For a moment he was at a loss; he was used to being respected for his diplomatic skills, not ridiculed. The idea of observing without intervention was obviously alien to them, and his skill in Tahitian was sorely lacking.

'I can't help you. I must respect my Queen. I'm her servant. I'm sure you understand.' His simple declarations fell like hopeless footfalls.

Moana leaned forward and laid a paternal hand on his shoulder. 'You have no power. I understand.'

That wasn't how Henry saw it, but he remained silent. Johnson explained in his more fluent Tahitian that Henry was waiting for two governments, who were almost at war over the issue, to decide, and then for the Queen to instruct him as a result. It could take a long time before orders arrived. Henry felt foolish as they stared at him. It seemed he wasn't the powerful captain they'd imagined.

Ra'anui reached out and patted his leg. 'Ah, you're a little chief.' Ra'anui's long nails scratched on his trousers. 'You wait for orders from a bigger chief. We understand.'

Although that was true, Henry felt the pricking of pride. 'The British have many lands, all around the world.' Johnson was looking at him, eyebrows raised. Henry stopped himself, reflecting that the British might still take over administration, and he had to consider his relationship to these men then. But in fact, their strategy seemed to be working – they had an almost impenetrable camp, and their surprise forays against the French kept them on the back foot. Of course they couldn't win – numbers were against them – but they were holding out. These men had their pride, and their island was in jeopardy.

'I'm sorry the French are here. I'm sorry for the way they have behaved. I wish I could help you, but, yes, I'm only a Captain, waiting until the – bigger chiefs - have decided.

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Three tattooed faces looked at him with pity in their eyes. It was almost unbearable, but Henry held his tongue and let them patronise him, for a change - he'd heard Bruat and his cronies patronise these men often enough.

As he looked at their open faces, for the first time he really felt the hopelessness of their situation. The strength in their shoulders and the calm in their eyes would be useless. Perhaps Queen Pomare's disengagement was wise, after all; resistance only would lead to more bloodshed. More ships would come. More men would fill the boots of every foreign soldier they clubbed to the ground, French or English. Sooner or later, it would dawn on them. He felt the chill of that knowledge as he sat opposite them.

They left with only water in the saddlebags. Johnson smiled at Henry as they rode out the way they'd come in. Despite his irritation that Johnson hadn't warned him, Henry considered it worthwhile to have seen the camp, and it was unlikely he'd have managed it alone.

'I suppose I should thank you for my humiliation,' he observed as they made their way down through the trees.

'Don't mention it,' Johnson chuckled.

'Is there really a waterfall full of frolicking nymphs, or did you mean a camp full of tattooed warriors? Do you have any further surprises planned?'

'No further surprises,' Johnson smiled. 'Or only very pleasant ones...there really is a waterfall. Nymphs may or may not be frolicking.'

After a couple of miles back in the direction of Faa'a, Henry heard singing filtering through the trees. Johnson stopped, raising his hand, and Henry pulled up his mare. Without the sound of the horses brushing through the undergrowth, a quiet thudding could be heard, along with the faraway sound of women singing.

'That's them. Good. We must be close.'

Johnson altered their course towards the sound. Greased with sweat, they made their way towards the promise of cool water. Sweet and liquid phrases drifted towards them

through the trees. Henry couldn't make out the words, but the song sounded wistful. Several voices made up a rhythmic undertow, while others sang a lilting melody that undulated over the lower notes. The rumble of falling water murmured behind the song, as well as a mysterious, steady beating.

The forest trees thinned out, revealing a waterfall tumbling down a high rock face into a pool replete with women.

'You see?' Johnson said. 'Nymphs.'

Were they naked? Some were standing in the pool, up to their waists, patting the shining water as they sang. Others knelt around the edge of the pool, beating on large logs. Several of them held their batons aloft, waving as Henry and Johnson approached. Henry could see that some of them had pareos wrapped about their hips. There were no men to be seen anywhere.

As they approached, Henry felt as if they were intruding, but several of the women got up, apparently unconcerned, their bodies gleaming with moisture.

'John – son! Johnson!'

The naked women in the pool smacked their palms on the water. About a dozen girls and women were kneeling around the pool, beating something pale and pulpy onto recumbent logs with wooden batons. Singing in time to each blow, they were beating to the same rhythm, their arms rising and falling, easy but powerful. Without faltering in their rhythm, they looked up. Their team work reminded Henry of his men winding in the anchor, singing to the rhythm of their task – but his sailors didn't exude the happy satisfaction that was evident here. These women made a picture of joy as they worked. Henry wished he'd brought his watercolours.

'What are they making?'

'Bark cloth – from mulberry bark. They call it tapa.'

Johnson was removing his shirt. Two of the women standing in the pool waded out and walked towards them, picking up and wrapping pareos around their waists as they left the pool. Johnson stepped forward to meet them, now stripped to the waist, holding out his

hands. Henry wished he could appear as unembarrassed. Their wet breasts swayed as they came closer. Sunlight bounced off their shining shoulders. Once again Henry felt at a disadvantage; he couldn't see their faces. Hanks of soaked hair curved about their necks and shoulders. The one in front was pregnant, her pareo slung below the flagrant bulk of her belly. Her breasts were large; Henry could see dark veins beneath her skin. Awkward and fascinated, he tried not to stare, keeping his gaze above her swaying stomach, above her breasts, on the tiare flower stuck behind her ear. Johnson greeted both women warmly, then turned to Henry.

‘Captain Henry - this is Miri, Tehani’s mother.’

‘Ah yes – how are you?’

As Henry shaded his eyes against the sun, he recognised her face. She was more pregnant than when they’d first met, but not as distraught. He hoped he sounded less strained than he felt. It wasn’t often he was expected to make conversation with semi-naked women.

‘I’m well.’ Miri’s eyes twinkled.

Was she aware of his embarrassment? He was conscious that he hadn’t achieved what she’d wanted with the Governor, but at least she didn’t appear to bear a grudge.

Behind Miri, the second woman was silent. Her body was well made; ample and stately. As she moved out from behind Miri, dark letters carved in a line across her face became visible. She was the woman who’d been tattooed.

‘And this is Atea.’

Henry bowed. She was only a yard away, but her eyes fixed on him with an expression he couldn’t interpret. Water dripped from her long hair onto her breasts. Her nipples were dark. Again, he concentrated on keeping his eyes on her face. Oddly, the letters there were upside down, and in English. Despite the healing being incomplete, he could make out the word ‘MURDERER’.

‘And now I’m going for a dip.’ As he spoke, Johnson strolled off with Miri, chatting about the type of mulberry tree they were using to make the barkcloth.

Atea gazed at Henry without any obvious dislike. Her eyes were kind and sorrowful – not at all the eyes of a murderer. Drops of water continued to snake down her neck towards her breasts.

‘I’m sorry,’ he stumbled in Tahitian, ‘I talked to the Governor, but he was –’ He couldn’t think of words for ‘unwilling’ or ‘decided’. Atea looked back at him. ‘But it was no good –’ He shook his head, wanting to make recompense for his inability to intervene in her punishment. ‘He was – not my friend - I’m sorry.’

‘I can see you are sorry,’ she replied. She stood before him as if in a space all of her own, apparently unaware of her naked breasts or the semi-transparent pareo clinging to her thighs.

Surely she couldn’t have killed anyone, Henry thought; her demeanour was so mild. Even in his current blundering, she seemed to regard him with compassion rather than disappointment. Her silence made him want to speak, but he could think of nothing worthwhile to say.

‘You went to Moorea,’ she suggested helpfully. ‘You made pictures of people there. Did you make a picture of Pomare? I haven’t seen her for a long while - since she went. I was her midwife when she was here.’

‘Yes, I made pictures,’ he replied. ‘The people in Moorea were good to me.’ He felt like a young man at a soirée being tutored in conversation by a society beauty. ‘Everyone was kind. But not Queen Pomare – I mean, I made no picture of her. She was kind to us, she gave us food.’ He tried to think of something more diplomatic to say about the Queen but failed. Atea adjusted her pareo. Henry tried not to look at the dark triangle beneath the thin cloth. ‘Perhaps I could make a picture of you?’

The words tumbled out before he stopped to think. As he realised what he’d said, heat crept up his neck. How could he be so stupid? She’d just been disfigured – she wouldn’t want to be painted. What a fool he was.

‘I mean – if you want, not if you don’t –’

He waited for her reply, afraid he'd heaped insult upon injury. Yet she betrayed no sign of displeasure. Her reply was slow to arrive, but was put softly, almost shyly.

'Yes.'

'Tomorrow, then,' he stumbled on, 'come to the ship tomorrow. If you can. If you're not –' He couldn't think of a word for 'busy'. When was a Tahitian ever busy? 'If you're not doing something - important...'

'Yes, I will come.'

Instinctively, he put out his hand to shake on this agreement. Still without smiling, she put her hand in his. Her hand was cool. Her skin slid against his. She looked at him as their hands met.

'Not tomorrow. But I will come.'

Chapter 12

She wasn't ready to go when he asked. She thought about his blue eyes. At the waterfall he'd looked at her as if he was hurt inside, too. But before she went to be painted she wanted her face to be healed, at least not crusted with lumpy scabs, so she waited for all the crusts to be gone. The skin would never be smooth again, not how it was before. There were many days of itching and not scratching, just patting at her face with seawater, resisting the urge to tear at her cheeks. Even when the crusts had fallen away it was horrible to feel the raised scars lumping and puckering across her face. Aunt Amura had a mirror a sailor had given her, but Atea didn't want to look. Before the tattoo she'd looked, at one part of her face after another – it didn't all fit into the little shining disc. There were her smiling lips, her teeth white and straight. One eye she was looking out of, but lonely without the other eye. An ear with a tiare flower behind it, for Temana. In those days she used to be beautiful. Everyone said so, ever since she was a young girl, how beautiful, how beautiful she was. Aunt Amura brushed her hair, admiring its length and shine. Her own mother showed her how to wash carefully morning and night, to cut her nails and scrub her feet with rocks. She massaged her with monoi oil until she smelt as beautiful too. Everyone told her to look after her beauty. Grandmother Puatea taught her dancing, helped her practise graceful gestures with her hands, how to swing her hips, how to turn and look, letting her eyes call out love. Everyone wanted her to be beautiful, but now it was a virtue she'd lost. She was glad Riva had died before she could see the ruining of her daughter's beauty.

The scars drew tighter and the marks sat fast. Atea kept to her hut, waded out and fished in the lagoon, visited Miri. She stayed quiet and alone. Instead of going with the other women to watch the men throwing in the coconut spearing contest, she swam in the sea and slept in the shade. She heard them going into the forest, laughing and shouting, and she heard them coming back, calling out that Heimana had won, but she didn't want to join them at the big hut to drink cava. Instead of slipping into the forest at full moon to dance where

the Oui-ouis wouldn't see, she lit a fire by her hut and sat with its quiet crackle, cooking fish and mape nuts. No one could see her face when she was alone by the fire. Did those missionaries think she could forget – that she needed to be reminded? Everyone knew what she'd done, and it sat inside her like a lump of black coral. When people went to collect vi or make music, she wasn't there. Her body was too sorrowful to shake into laughter or dancing. For so long, she'd kept herself quiet with Temana, watching his moods until she forgot her own. The lump of coral inside replaced the numbness of trying to please Temana. Tides of sorrow and tiredness washed around the lump inside her, that she had loved him, that she had killed him, that even so she missed him.

In the daytime she made mats, so many that her rafters filled up with them. Using her hands was soothing; the dry slip of leaves through her fingers, weaving the length in and out, over and over, sun on her shoulders warming her, remembering her dreams of early morning, crawling like a crab to her hole, sand gritting in her fingernails. The sweet grassy scent of pandanus spread around her as the day heated up and she let her dreams fade away. The sound of the waves, and Miri talking with Heremanu drifted across the afternoon. Young Tapoa came to show her a flower, thoughtful, bent over the red petals. At least her scars didn't make him cry. She told him the flower was as beautiful as he was, and a smile slowly brightened his face. He wandered off to Heremanu, while Atea thought of Tapoa being born, a baby who didn't cry out, but stretched his body as if he was glad to arrive, then snuffled up close to his mother, rubbing his face into her warmth. All day long she carried on weaving, watching the mats growing under her hands.

Most she gave away to visitors; Meherio, Herenui, Miri, Aunt Amura. They came to be with her, to show their understanding, and maybe they came to get used to looking at her ugly new face. All of them had seen or heard Temana's rages. All of them knew what she'd done, they didn't need to be reminded by marks in her skin. Temana was dead, and he wouldn't bring fish, or his smile, or his anger home any more. Every day, she split leaves and wove them until her fingers ached and her back was tired of leaning over. Another mat

was finished and she was alive. Each time she rolled it up and put it in the rafters. Herenui said that the ways of the Oui-ouis confused even the spirits.

Her body began to feel looser, as if mourning drained something out of her. One evening, as she watched the sun going to bed, she thought of Captain Henry on his ship. Now she wanted to do something else; to peep into his world. She wanted to see his blue eyes, she didn't know why.

The next day, she found an English sailor and told him to give the tapitane a message; she was ready to be painted, send a boat in the morning. When she woke, she put on her missionary dress, braided her hair, and tied fresh palm leaves around her head. They preferred to see her people in their clothes. The dress was pink as a poked out tongue. It buttoned up to her throat, holding her breath too tight. Doing up the top button, she breathed carefully inside the neck. The popa'a didn't know how to breathe. Showing herself that she could still swing her arms and legs, she walked along the sand. The dress wrapped close around her legs, her ankles, and stopped her walking freely – each step had to be smaller. The sleeves squeezed her arms. Cloth pulled across her breasts. Did their clothes make the popa'a notice their bodies more, being so tied in, so careful?

Standing with her feet in the sea, she waited on the beach. It was the first time she'd gone to a popa'a ship, and she knew there were many popa'a men there, but she was determined to be brave – others had been on the ships. But they hadn't gone alone. Nothing that happened mattered now. The sand hugged her toes, the suck and drag of the tide soothing her ankles. She breathed in the strength of Hina. After a while, a boat came with two men in it, sitting backwards, pulling hard on their paddles as if they were going to battle. The way they paddled used to make Temana laugh; he said they looked afraid, all hunched up and facing the wrong way. As they reached the beach, one of the popa'a men jumped out, pulling the boat up onto the sand. His face was red.

'Miss Atea?'

'Atea,' she replied. She was not a Miss.

He nodded as if he was right, pointing into the boat. They must be in a hurry, she thought – they forgot to greet her properly, or to welcome her onto their boat. Atea climbed in and sat down where he pointed. They didn't stand in the sea for a while to arrive, to cool off. Instead, they wiped their faces on their shirts, pushed off and started rowing back, sweat still dampening their hair. They smelt of meat and smoke. She didn't try to talk; it wasn't for her to begin. So she trailed one hand over the side, cooling herself with the slide of water through her fingers, looking at the ship. It rose out of the water like a dark island. She could roll over the edge of the rowing boat and swim away, even in her dress. The people standing at the top looked smaller than children. Great masts pointed at the sky, ropes hanging from them like vines. As they drew closer, she could see coloured pieces of cloth hung at the tops of the masts – not as pretty as the garlands her people made for their masts, but she was glad the popa'a decorated their ships too.

The ship looked even taller the closer they got. There was a shadow under its steep sides; she could see through the shaded water to the tribes of fish swimming beneath. Those who'd been to the ship said there were caves inside where many men ate, where they slept hanging from the roof like caterpillars. She felt her aloneness as she looked up at the round holes set in the side of the ship. At night, from the shore, they looked like many eyes alight with spirit, watching.

They hauled the boat up the side, swinging about like a basket of fruit, wobbling as if they might fall out at any moment. Atea held on, thinking she could still swim back. Pull after pull, they were hauled up, higher than a coconut palm. The ship was made of thick slices of wood. How many trees were cut to make it? The water below got further away, but she could still dive in. She held on. Everyone who came on a popa'a ship told of strange things; she wanted to see them. And she reminded herself of the honour. The captain had asked to make her picture.

Many hands reached out to help her over the side. They were eager with touching as they pulled her from the boat, but once her feet felt the wood floor, she drew herself up tall and the sailors moved back. She looked straight in their eyes, one by one, keeping them

away. The ship rocked, slower than a canoe, and she stood with her toes spread, balancing, ready. Masts rose above with bundles of sails bunched along their arms like muscles. How did such a tall ship not fall over?

The men stood around her as if they were a trapping net. Their eyes were hungry. There were no women on popa'a ships. Why didn't they bring their women? It was big enough. The masts creaked as if they hurt, as if the ship were a creature wheezing in its sleep. The ropes knocked and swung with their own music. She looked at the sails and masts and men, and everywhere ropes curled up in shapes like shells. The captain and his men must be very skilled to use so many sails. Boys gathered around her as well as men; one of them had hair as white as a spirit, smiling a real smile between two men rubbing their lips. Swifts cried their thin cries high above the ship. Were they telling her to go back?

But then the captain came, smiling and holding out his hand. A dog ran behind him, close to his heels, small and soft, its fur the same colour as her skin. It called out in its little singing voice, long ears dangling beside its pretty face. It even had pretty eyelashes. The men's faces changed when the captain came, but he didn't speak to them, he just spoke to her, in his slow Tahitian, saying he was glad to see her. Then he pointed a way and she followed.

As they climbed down under the floor into tunnels that smelt of sweat, he spoke the welcome to his ship. Atea watched the straightness of his back, how he turned and smiled at her as he led the way down and along. There were more men down the steps, some lying in slings of cloth hung in the roof, and some sitting at long tables with small pictures gathered in their hands. They watched her pass without greeting, but their eyes slid over her with interest. Two boys were playing on the floor, grabbing at bones.

Pleased that the captain knew to welcome her, she followed behind the dog, trying to remember the way out. He took her to a big room with wide windows looking out towards Pape'ete. Maybe she could still jump if she needed to. She went to look, but there were windows stopping the air. Some parts were opened, letting the scent of the sea in. The closed windows looked like hard, dirty water. She put her hand up to touch.

‘*Glass*,’ said the captain. ‘I don’t know the Tahitian word.’

Atea looked at him. Did he think she didn’t know? She could feel a bottle in her hand, hard and cold. ‘*Glass*,’ she repeated. The captain was careful when he spoke their words, so she tried to make her mouth the shape of his word, hissing like an angry bird at the end of it. ‘*Glasss*.’ The bottles Temana drank from with the Oui-ouis. There was no Tahitian word.

His bed was made of wood, bigger than the cloths the other men slept in, hanging like bats. She wanted to touch the red cloth covering the bed; it shone like water at night. He made a noise in his throat when she went to touch – did he think she was going to get into his bed? How could he be comfortable bent up all night? Why didn’t he stretch out on the floor? His bed smelt of him, and the cover was soft as an old woman’s flesh under her fingers.

‘My sister Elizabeth gave that to me. It’s called *silk*.’

‘Silk,’ she repeated. She didn’t want to stop touching the kindness in it.

‘Come - you can sit here,’ he said, pointing at a chair.

She could tell he wanted to get her away from his bed. His body looked awkward, leaning forward.

‘Please, come and sit.’

But she didn’t want to sit just then, so instead she moved around his room, looking at the many pictures of fishes all around the walls while the captain said more about the bed cloth, that it was made by worms that ate leaves and made little beds of cloth. It sounded like an ancestor story. He was talking as if he was uneasy, but she was in his ship. He talked better than most of the popa’a, but he was still quite hard to understand. When he said Tahitian words he sounded like a sweet and awkward boy, trying and stumbling. At the end of the wall with the fish pictures there was a washing place with a mirror joined to the wall, bigger than Aunt Amura’s mirror. When she saw it she wanted to hide, but as he talked about the worms, she decided to do it. Miri didn’t want her to look in a mirror, not yet – so

she'd told Aunt Amura to keep it away from Atea. But no-one would stop her here; she was going to look. In the space of his talking she found the courage.

She stepped backwards towards the mirror, until she could feel the washstand at her hip. He was by his table with his drink in his hand. He wasn't going to stop her. She took a breath, leaning towards the mirror until a face appeared inside it. Was that her? A row of ugly beetles walked across that face, from cheek to cheek, longer than a Oui-oui moustache. She felt sick, but she made herself lean closer. She could feel him watching. It was her. Her eyes. She was looking out from that face. She brushed her fingers over the beetles; the scabs were gone, leaving black from the candlenut under her skin. All the marks were ugly. Awkward popa'a signs like bent knees and elbows. Some of the shapes were the same. One looked like breasts hanging down. They made her shaky, as if someone was shouting insults in her face, over and over. They wanted her to carry the badness on her face forever, shouting ugliness at everyone who looked at her. And it was true – she'd been ready to kill Temana with that bottle.

The captain was behind her, and she wanted to hide. Why did she come? She kept her back to him, afraid to let him look at her. When she leaned back from the mirror, the tattoo looked more like the moustaches that Oui-ouis grew on their faces. A dark line. Disgusting. The smell of the soldiers in the garrison cell.

Afraid she might be sick, she put her hands on the wash table.

'Are you all right?' He stepped closer. 'Do you feel ill?'

She shook her head and waited. He stayed still. When she felt steadier, she dipped her hands inside the washing bowl, then wiped her wet hands over her face as if she could smear the tattoo away. The scars lumped along under her fingertips. Of course they wouldn't wash away.

'Please, do sit down.'

But she couldn't let him look at her, not yet. Breathing carefully, she moved sideways along the wall in front of the pictures of fish, hiding from the kindness in his voice. The fishes didn't look as if they were swimming, they looked as if they were dead. By the

window, there was a picture of a man older than the captain in a big hat, and a woman who looked like him, with the same dark hair and smiling eyes. These pictures had wooden edges carved around them as if they were more precious than the fishes. She still felt sick, but she took a deep breath. Fresh air came in through the open parts of the windows.

‘Who is this?’ She pointed at the man under the hat.

‘My father. He was a sailor too, and Admiral, but he doesn’t sail any more; he’s too old.’

She pointed at the woman. ‘Your mother?’ The woman looked young.

‘No, that’s my sister – Elizabeth. She made the cover.’

He gestured at his bed. Atea imagined this woman with her hands full of the worms that made cloth.

‘She was born with me, on the same day. My “twin” – she – I don’t know the word in Tahitian – both of us born together?’

‘Twin,’ she repeated. ‘Elizabet.’ Sometimes there were two babies born together. Not often, but sometimes. Both babies could live, but it made the woman very big. He went close to the picture, looking with warm eyes. ‘You miss her.’ All of his face was saying it, but he looked shy when she spoke.

He tipped his face down. ‘Yes. She was having another baby, when I was sailing here. But now I know she’s well, and the baby is a girl.’

Henry was pink with talking as if it was taboo.

‘Are her eyes like yours - the colour of the sea?’ The picture was all brown, but she knew his people weren’t brown.

‘Yes, they are,’ he smiled. ‘We were always together – before I came to sea. When I go home I visit her – and her family.’

Atea felt the warmth in him, the sadness that they were apart. He glanced at her, a shy glance, not like the man who stood in front of his men with a straight back and the shoulders of a chief. His shyness made her bolder.

‘Why didn’t she come here - Elizabet? Why don’t women come with you?’

There was a knock at the door, and Henry called out. Another man came in, doing the salute, very serious. 'This is Roberts, my First Lieutenant,' said Henry. He was standing up straighter. He wasn't going to answer her question now.

Roberts didn't smile as he bent himself forwards. His yellow hair flopped over. She wanted to hide her face, but she didn't. When he stood straight again she noticed the tiny veins that made his cheeks look hot. Copying him, she bent forwards, then straightened up. He looked as if he didn't like her. Why was he here? Was he going to help with the painting? Now there were two of them, like the two Oui-ouis in the cell.

'A drink, for you?' The captain pointed to a bottle of red drink.

It looked like the drink that made your legs soft, the same one Temana liked.

'Can I have water?'

Captain Henry nodded, pulled out the chair and gestured for her to sit at the table. Pastor Coe said Christ asked people to sit at his table, so she knew the captain was honouring her. The legs of the chair looked weak, so she sat carefully, glad to hold onto the cool table. Roberts put water in front of her ceremoniously. The cup was like water itself gone stiff, and carved with many cuts.

'Glass.'

'Yes,' Captain Henry smiled.

'Thank you,' she said to Roberts. He still didn't smile.

It shone before her on the table like a precious gift, too precious to touch. It looked beautiful, sparkling and shining like something to worship. She would never be beautiful again and they wanted a picture of her. Perhaps they were cruel inside. The captain poured himself a red drink and held it up towards her, then drank. The red showed through his glass as he tipped it to his mouth. Slowly, she put out her hand and tapped the glass in front of her with her fingernails. It chirped like a bird.

'You drink.' Roberts nodded encouragement as if she was a sick child.

Would it make her drunk like Temana?

She picked it up. It made a sound against her teeth, but it tasted only of water – old water kept too long - so she drank it all.

The two men looked at each other. There was a still space in the room that she didn't understand – something between them. The dog flopped down beside the captain. Atea wanted to sit on the floor beside it and stroke its ears. Captain Henry spoke to Roberts, telling him what to do like a chief. He flicked his fingers towards the desk, making Roberts stay. She hoped he'd stay over there.

Roberts sat down with his back to them. He pulled out flat white leaves like beaten bark. Paper. There were marks on the paper at her tattooing. Sickness lurched in her stomach again. Ugly forever. She couldn't see Roberts' face as he bent over his paper. He got out a stick and a pot, dipped the stick in the pot and began to scratch. He was there because of her, like a guard.

The captain sat down on the other side of the table. The dog moved with him, her nose almost touching his shiny boots. His hands lay on the table, browner than the skin of his face, with long fingers, and clean nails. Not many of the sailors had clean hands. He didn't look at her like the men on the deck. His eyes were warmer now he had his back to Roberts.

'Did you make all those?' Atea looked at the pictures of fish on the walls.

'Yes,' he smiled. 'I like the colours of fish here.'

She didn't want to say that their colours were too pale, and their shapes were flat. She thought about telling him how Tohu the god of tattooing painted the patterns onto the fish; usually the popa'a didn't know about things like that, and they liked to know - but she didn't want to talk about tattooing. There were pictures of ships too, prickly with masts like his.

Captain Henry pulled at a black cover that was on the table. Underneath were more paintings. He turned one towards her. It was odd to see things she knew so well lying flat and pale in the paper picture. The sea lay still, with the trees around the bay and the huts just as they were, in all the right places. The mountains rose up on top, with clouds sitting above.

All the forest and mountains and sky squeezed onto one small paper. It reminded her of someone dead – the shapes were there, but all the colour and life had run out. Atea wanted to ask if he'd left this picture out in the sun, but she didn't want to insult him. The trees couldn't move, the sea couldn't sparkle and breathe.

'Did you make it?'

'Yes.' He nodded. 'I can take them to England to show people. They're not good, but the best I can do.'

Perhaps he wasn't a kahuna of painting.

'Do you have a teacher?'

He laughed. 'I can see why you ask! No – I had a teacher when I was young – she was very kind... and good at painting.' He looked away from her. 'She saw what was beautiful.'

Atea guessed the woman was beautiful, too, from his expression.

'She taught me about the stars, to help me to be a sailor, and she taught my sisters to paint.'

'You have another sister? Two sisters? Why don't they come here with you?'

Henry shrugged. 'Elizabeth lives with her husband and their children now. My father is sick, so my mother and my sister Prudence look after him.'

He turned over another painting – another ship. Rain was all around it. How did he paint the rain? Roberts scratched away at his paper. All the paintings lay in a pile; fish, people, the bay, as if they were the same. Tahitians made carvings of important things; gods, boats, or ancestors. There were no paintings of his popa'a god here. Pastor Coe had one of Jesus.

'You like to make pictures of ships.'

He laughed quietly, in his throat. 'I like ships. And there are many different ships to paint. This is a French ship, that's from Spain.' He pointed at the one on the wall with the fish. 'This is mine.' He pointed at the ship in the rain.

Atea touched the rain. It was dry, but she could see that it was his ship; the same masts and shape and woman on the front. The pastor said they should cover their breasts, but all the ships that came had women as beautiful and naked as Tahitians on the prow. 'How many different ships are there?' The French one had a different shape, the Spanish one looked smaller.

'There are more English ships than ... all the fingers and all the toes on you, me and Roberts.'

Atea frowned, feeling her fingers one by one, going from one hand to the other, then gazing under the table at her toes as she pressed them into the wooden boards beneath her feet. She imagined all her fingers and toes as tiny ships, thrown overboard, floating off, growing bigger and bigger.

'And if you count English and French ships together, more than all the fingers and toes of all the ladies who were at the waterfall.'

She looked at him to see if he was joking. Could that be true? He was smiling, but he looked as if he meant what he said. So Many? Roberts was nodding too, his chest puffing a little with all the ships.

'All full of Oui-oui soldiers?' His blue eyes looked straight at her, full of light. Perhaps he was joking. As if he was very pleased, Henry nodded back at her, which she knew meant yes. 'And England has the same?'

'England has many also – more. And enough soldiers to put in them too.'

Her eyes slid around the room, searching for something comforting. The red cover. She could ask Johnson if it was true. She felt sick. If he spoke the truth, all their warriors would be killed. Her uncles, Herenui's sons, Meherio's brother, Tehani's father, her nephews, on and on, all of them. Their beautiful bodies torn open, bleeding, and more ships coming with more soldiers. Roberts turned and looked at her silence. She didn't want them to see her pain, so she asked another question as if she didn't care.

'How many fishes have you painted?'

Henry laughed. 'Not as many as you've cooked in one season.'

‘How do you choose what to paint?’ she asked. ‘Why fishes and ships?’

The captain gazed at his pile of paintings. ‘When I look at something and I like it, I want to make a picture. When I came to the forest with Johnson, I was happy to see you all making tapa. The women looked pretty singing - and working...with the sun and the trees and the waterfall. All pretty together.’ He rubbed his chin. ‘It’s hard to say. Something calls out to me that it is a picture. I’m sorry for my bad Tahitian...’

He didn’t rush to answer; he stopped to think.

‘When I go back in England, people look at them.’ He pointed at the paintings. ‘No one makes tapa there. No one can see the mountains of Tahiti, or the waterfalls...’ He turned to the paintings on his walls. ‘We don’t have those fish, but I can take these pictures home with me.’

His eyes brightened as he talked. He pushed another painting towards her. It was a canoe on the water with two women standing up by the mast, and a boy banging a drum. They looked happy, as if he’d scooped them up out of the sea with garlands in their hair, sailing and sailing. Their happiness was there, but without the beating drum, without breath, or laughter. She traced their faces with her fingers.

‘Is that Herenui? It looks like his canoe.’

She put her finger on the one that looked like Herenui. Although Herenui was a man of great mana, the flame of his body wasn’t there.

‘Yes, I think so. He makes canoes?’

Atea was pleased that he knew Herenui. ‘He does. He’s a kahuna of canoes. Are you a kahuna?’

There was a silence. She glanced at him. He looked like a man who has made a good carving, but won’t boast about it. Roberts looked round, waiting for his captain to answer.

‘No, I don’t think so - ’

‘You’re too modest, Sir,’ Roberts smiled. He looked at her. ‘Many people like to see the captain’s paintings...’

The captain shrugged. 'Because they want to see Tahiti, not my paintings.' He turned over another picture of a ship. More ships than fishes.

Atea thought for a while. He wasn't showing her pictures of the tall sharp houses the popa'a built, or the prison, or the soldiers watching.

'Why don't you make pictures of the Oui-oui things –the Governor's house, or those wooden walls they put across the paths?'

'That's true. I don't paint them.' His eyes looked into hers. 'They're too ugly – and too sad.'

That was a good answer, she thought. It was too sad; she didn't want to think about the prison or the soldiers either. But why did he want to paint her? Didn't he know she was sad?

He leaned forward and opened a wooden box. Lots of colours were inside, squashed into small, fat squares. She leaned forward. They looked tasty, but they smelt of stones. She put her finger on the yellow, expecting it to be soft as egg yolk, but it was hard.

'Where do you get these colours? How do you melt them into pictures?'

He smiled as if there was something funny. 'I get them from a man at home who sells colours. When I want to make a picture, I wet the paint – like this.'

He licked his finger and rubbed it on the yellow. She watched his tongue as he licked. Suddenly it was quiet; the roof was close, the walls so near. As he reached towards the paints, she could see more of his wrist coming out of his sleeve. There was something fond in the way he reached out, touching the colours with his fingertips. Watching his hands, she wanted to slide her hand up his forearm, to touch the warmth and the strength of it. The golden hairs on his wrist were pretty. But she wasn't ready to touch.

The yellow of the sun sat on the tip of the captain's finger. He smeared it on the corner of the paper, smudging yellows that got weaker and weaker on the white paper. As he bent over the smudges, he glanced up at her. His eyes were the stirred up blue of the sea before a storm. Blue was an odd colour for eyes – the airiness of sky, not the safe brown of the ground. His eyes made her stomach tip.

She looked at his paint box.

Slowly, she put her finger to her lips and licked the tip as he had. Which one? She chose blue, the darker one, closer to the colour of his eyes. Instead of eating it, she rubbed her finger on the paint like he had. Then she held it up. It stained her fingertip like a tattoo.

‘Will it stay on me?’

‘No. It’s called water colour. You can wash it off with water.’

She pointed to the picture of the people in the canoe. Now she could ask. ‘Has this been washed?’

He smiled. ‘No. I wet the paint, and sometimes the paper, but I don’t wash the picture. Why do you ask?’

‘It’s so pale.’ She pointed at the paints. ‘Here the colours are strong –’ she pointed at the painting – ‘and here they are... pale, like your people – like the popa’a.’ Suddenly he looked hurt. Never point out the faults of a finished canoe, she thought, but it was too late. His body was still. The air was close around them.

‘You’re right - I can’t make them strong enough. Tahiti blue is very strong. And green, that’s strong too. I can put colour on top, on top,’ - he put his hands on top of each other to show what he meant - ‘but it won’t be right. Never right. I’m sorry.’ He pushed his hair back. ‘The man who made the paints didn’t know your island.’

The captain was leaning over her – she looked at his cheek where gold hairs were beginning to peep. She wanted to touch to see how they felt, soft or sharp.

‘I like your pictures.’

He looked at her as if he was pleased, but uneasy. But she was ugly now. She sat back in her chair, taking her hands off the table. He got up and began to put things on the table – small sticks, cups of water.

‘Are you all right - comfortable?’

Atea felt the wooden seat of the chair holding her up, the edge of the table smooth in front of her. She glanced across at Roberts. He wasn’t watching her.

‘Yes.’

At least she was safe; they wouldn't want such an ugly woman. She put her hands together in her lap as the missionaries taught, and waited. A breeze blew in and she could see the sea. At last Captain Henry sat down and looked at her. She looked at the fish on the walls – she couldn't stare back at him. After a long while, he picked up one of his sticks and began to dab at the paper. Slowing her breath to match the gentle tilting of her chair, she listened to the sound of the ship groaning as it rocked in the water. Sounds drifted in with the warm breeze, birds crying out, men talking, ropes knocking the masts. Up above them, a boy was singing.

She watched his shoulders loosen, all his attention on his painting stick. He looked at her but not into her eyes. Again and again his gaze slid over her face – then returned to his paper. The sitting became easier. He stroked and stroked with his painting stick, smoothing colours into the paper. Sometimes the dog pushed her nose into his leg. When the dog pushed, his hand dropped down to touch her, without even looking. They knew each other as if they were friends. The way he touched the dog was sweet; he smoothed her head and stroked her long ears, and there was pleasure in the dog's half closed eyes, in the way she lifted her head to meet his hand. It was a kind of talking between them. Not once did he look at the dog, but the closeness between them was clear. What a clever animal, thought Atea; she got him to do what she enjoyed.

After a while she was no longer too shy to look at him. Although he was pale, he wasn't thin and sick-looking, like some of the popa'a – his shoulders and chest looked strong. He could probably paddle a canoe a long way if he wanted to. When his hair fell down over his face, sometimes he hooked it back over his ear with the painting stick. Stray strands brushed against his lips as he painted. It looked slippery. How would it feel in her hand? He looked up, then back at his paper – up and down, up and down. All his attention was in his task, like a kahuna. Her hand wanted to reach out and push his hair back. It surprised her; she hadn't had such a feeling since Temana. Suddenly the loneliness of being without a man stretched out ahead of her, perhaps for years. Would she ever be loved again?

'How does it feel now?'

She started, surprised. 'What?'

He stroked his hand across his own face, from cheek to cheek. 'Your tattoo.'

Why was he asking? The popa'a were confusing. He was asking as if he asked about her health. A different kind of silence lay between them.

'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked.' He picked his sticks out of the water and bent over, wiping them. 'Please, forgive me.'

She didn't know what to say. I have to die to myself. I used to be beautiful and happy. Now I can never be the same. It's tight and stops me from smiling but that's nothing, nothing at all. The word on her face hung in the air between them. I'll never laugh again because I killed my Temana – I'll be alone forever.

'Would you like to see?' He held his hand out towards his painting. Roberts shifted in his chair. She'd almost forgotten him. He didn't get up. Suddenly she didn't want to look, she wanted to leave rather than see her ruined face on his paper. He didn't care, though; he turned the painting around to face her.

'I didn't paint your eyes very well. They don't look – what's the word? – Wet enough?' He made a noise in his throat. Sometimes when he spoke Tahitian his words were hard to understand, but he tried. 'They have the beauty of water...'

Did he say beauty? He'd chosen the wrong word – he didn't mean that. Quickly, as if the picture might sting, she glanced down, forcing herself. Her face looked back, damp and fresh. She looked again, shocked. Her face - there – her braids beside her cheeks, the thin palm garland around her head, even the folds around the neck of her dress were there. But most of all, her eyes looked up, out of the painting, dark and sad. They showed the weeping inside her, all through her. The bad word sat under her nose, across her cheeks; marks that would last until she died and the birds pecked away the skin.

When she thought of them the marks were shouting, a line of nasty shapes hiding her face, but in his painting they were smaller than she'd imagined. It wasn't beautiful as a tattoo should be – but her nose and mouth were clear on either side of the straggling black

marks. Her eyes looked out from the paper. The word didn't hide her face as she'd thought, and she didn't look dangerous or mad.

Her heart opened in her chest.

Without thinking, she raised her hand to touch his sleeve, but he pushed his chair back and stood, awkwardly. Atea stood up too. Roberts pushed his chair back as well and suddenly the room felt wrong, all of them standing there as if there was danger. She'd only wanted him to understand her gratitude.

'Maururu, Captain Henry. Thank you. I am on your paper.' She bent her head with respect. 'You are a kahuna of painting.'

It was a picture of her, not a picture of a murderer.

She was astonished that he could see her.

Chapter 13

During the following month, Henry received a procession of visits from English settlers and ne'er-do-wells, as well as calls from the Millers, and Pastor and Mrs Coe. He practised his Tahitian vocabulary with the Pastor, but confided in Roberts that he found the man so pompous his palms itched. Henry thanked Heaven that at least his own ship's Chaplain had some humility.

Many of the English residents of Tahiti rowed out to the Salamander hoping Henry would resolve their petty disputes, while others brought grievances with the French that they wanted him to champion on their behalf. Henry also discovered a number of charlatans who sought to make their fortunes. With the majority of difficulties presented to him, he realised that the complainants who came to him were the sort of gentlemen who – petty entrepreneurs and schemers eternally in hot water themselves – were seeking to embroil their government in their own dirty quarrels. Generally their complaints were reduced to nil when he told them to put their difficulties in writing. Johnson sometimes rowed over for a reviving drink in the evenings, and he was invaluable for providing a sensible angle on local gossip.

His crew were in good spirits, and keen to earn precious shore leave. Henry didn't enquire into the antics of his men on shore as long as the Tahitians brought no complaints of brawling or public indecency. The lugubrious local climate combined with the inactivity of a ship at anchor allowed increasing relaxation on board. As Henry strolled about the ship, the easy, lascivious talk between the men faltered at his approach, only to be picked up again in a desultory manner as he walked away. Even Roberts seemed to wax lyrical about his beloved more often, a tendency that Henry found easier to indulge than to constrain. The sunshine, the warmth and the cleansing libations of the lagoon along with fresh food and the tantalising proximity of women seemed to create a motley collection of yearning bodies. Of course there was copulation on shore, but at least it was conducted in the privacy of the huts

or palm groves rather than at the dockside as often happened in other ports. Many of the men had dreamed of these pleasures for months, perhaps years, and their well fed, tanned bodies set to their few tasks with ease as they recovered from the rigours of their journey. In their many hours of leisure, sailors ate, slept, danced, quarrelled and told the tallest of tales. When two months had passed at anchor, some sailors had formed close attachments with particular local women. Henry knew these were the ones to watch for desertion.

For his own part, both his body and his mind were stirred by the atmosphere on board. Since painting Atea, he'd found himself dreaming of Grace, of hazy trysts at twilight with water always running in the background. Even when awake he felt the longing she'd roused. In the warmth and sunshine, sensual thoughts tormented him with fresh insistence. He'd been eighteen, and Grace just twenty-one, when they'd discovered the pleasures of even the slightest intimacies. A brush of the hand against a forearm. Her breath on his nape as she leaned over him to reach a book. A look across the dinner table shaking him to his stomach. Memories of Grace arose with fresh vigour as he strolled on deck, as he bent over his washing bowl in the mornings, as he half-listened to Roberts talking about his betrothed.

In his twenties he'd spent many weeks of leave travelling about, looking for his beloved. He followed one trace after another – a woman of the same name teaching in Kidderminster, another in a poor house in Crewe, a young 'widow' in Ludlow. Each time his hopes were raised, then dashed as soon as he saw the woman who was not his Grace. When he reached thirty, Elizabeth gently suggested that his attempts were hopeless; Grace could have changed her name, married, or even died... If she wanted to see him, he was easier to find – or she could seek out Elizabeth herself. Perhaps she didn't want to be found after all. He should allow himself his own life, perhaps consider finding a wife. He remembered his sister saying 'You are not a mythic hero, and Grace is in danger of becoming an unattainable goddess. You're not Ulysses, or Jason of the Argonauts, you're my brother Henry. Just Henry.'

It was hard to hear, but she meant it kindly. Knowing what she said was true, he relinquished his search. Yet he found he didn't care for the search for a wife. His mother

introduced him to a succession of young ladies, too sweet, too young, too malleable. No one else was Grace. He couldn't bear to dupe some poor innocent into being his eternally insufficient wife.

To pass the time usefully, both Henry and Roberts worked on improving their Tahitian, riding around the island meeting local chiefs and their wives. They'd studied the extended vocabularies made by Captain Cook as well as those of missionaries. Roberts was a great list maker, and took to recording the native place names. In the evenings on board they often discussed the findings of the day.

'Look at this, Sir, I've started on a list of place names as noted by Cook, comparing them to those recorded by your favourite missionary, Mr Ellis.' He held his workbook up for Henry to see. 'Just look at the way they've spelt them - what are we supposed to make of that?'

Roberts poured himself a glass of port while Henry glanced at the list. He'd found languages pleasurable after learning Latin, Greek then French with Grace. During his years at sea, he'd added some Italian and Portuguese, but nothing was like the open, vowel dominated sounds of Tahitian. It seemed simple at first, but he was learning there were many layers of meaning, and some words that just didn't translate, like mana – strength, but also spiritual power.

'Looks pretty extensive.' He nodded at the port. 'A bit early for that, Roberts, it's not even lunchtime. Don't get into a habit.'

'No, Sir. I'm just a little – I don't know. Bored?'

Roberts began strolling about with his glass, rolling the plentiful vowels on his tongue as if they were truffles, comparing the different pronunciations.

Captain Cook

Owhyhee

Mowee

Missionaries

Hawaii

Maui

Tahoorowa	Kadcolawi
Ranai	Lanai
Morotoi	Mololai
Woahoo	Oahu
Otaheite	Tahiti

'What do you make of it, though? You know I come from Kent - and anyone who lives there knows it's Kent, as do our neighbours. We all call it Kent - it's not Okentihoo or Kanti! Are they too lazy to give it a definite name, or is it some kind of secret - or joke, perhaps? Hang it all,' Roberts flopped back into his chair, 'let's get it settled. Even the most idiotic of village idiots knows the name of his village.'

'The fault may be more with those who tried to write it down, working by ear. Without a written language, it's bound to be guess work. And have you noticed how they like to add a vowel to the ends of our words. After all, their words all end in vowels -'

'Maybe that's what makes Tahitian sounds so childish - like doggie, dolly, sweetie, daddy, dearie...'

'They certainly have some trouble with English names. Captain Cook, for instance - 'Tapitane Tooti'. Anyway, I'd tend to trust Ellis's rendition rather than Cook's - it's more recent.'

'So you don't think they're playing games?'

Henry chuckled. 'Who? Cook and Ellis?'

'The natives, sir.'

'Imagine if you had the same task in England, with all the variations in local accent - why, even now, there are place names spelt several ways. If you think about it, our government has changed the names of islands hereabouts a number of times already - these islands alone have been called Sandwich, Society and King George's Islands...'

'Touché,' Roberts grinned. 'Anyway, I'm going to record the correct way to say things - otherwise how are we to get a grip on this language? Or the place?'

‘Mmm, you can add a third column beside Cook and Ellis -‘

‘And mine will be the correct one.’

‘Almost certainly.’ Henry smiled. ‘Do you plan to publish your definitive Tahitian when we return, for the elevation of polite society?’

Roberts sighed the sigh of someone who knows his adversary all too well.

‘I want to be clear,’ he persisted. ‘I don’t like negotiating with people who can’t be relied on to know where they live – even a child knows as much.’

‘A Tahitian child could probably sail a canoe to a neighbouring island whatever you choose to call it...’

‘If you weren’t my commanding officer, I’d say you were impossible.’

‘If you weren’t my First Lieutenant, I’d say you were exaggerating your pique in a futile attempt to provoke me.’ Henry raised his glass, which contained only water. ‘To the Queen.’

Roberts raised his. ‘Which one?’

Henry ignored him. ‘Her Most Honourable Majesty, Queen Victoria.’

There was a knock at the door, and Roberts opened it.

Seaman Wilkins saluted. ‘A new ship is arriving, Sir. Looks French.’

The Phaeton dropped anchor not far from the Salamander. Henry and Roberts went up to the quarterdeck to watch. The sun warmed Henry’s back as they leaned over the rails side by side, hoping for a boat to leave the newly arrived ship.

‘Letters,’ Henry said, rubbing his hands.

It was a happy convention that ships of whatever nationality carried the naval post, and the favour was returned. Both his mother and Elizabeth were faithful letter writers; he relished the delivery of their infrequent but lengthy missives.

Roberts was lively with anticipation. ‘Emily has agreed we’ll marry in the spring after we return - if we do leave within the year. I’ll be due some leave, and we can find a

modest house, close to her parents so she'll have some company once I return to sea.' He smiled as he spoke. 'Somewhere in Kent...even three rooms would do for the time being...'

Grace had spoken just as fondly of a little house where they could be together. He'd believed, as rashly as she, that obstacles to their happiness could be overcome. Every day at home had been fired with impatience as he waited to be alone with her. They'd often contrived to meet secretly after dinner in the copse down by the bridge. As he leaned over the rails with Roberts, he could almost smell the meadowsweet in the twilight as he listened for her step. He remembered the first time they sat on the low wall by the stream. She'd leaned against him, her lips soft against his. He could feel the warmth of her through his shirt. Bats squeaked above them, their music like a manifestation of his excitement as he touched her. He couldn't remember the words they'd exchanged, but he knew he'd vowed love, marriage, promised to convince his mother to agree their plans.

He'd promised. His heart sank with shame as he remembered. She'd begged reassurance, and he'd given it – then he'd taken advantage of her. He held onto the rail and stared over the lagoon as Roberts continued to list the advantages of living near relatives for a naval wife. The French ship was already surrounded by canoes. Had he believed his own promises? Had Grace? All he could remember now was the strength of his passion, and the bliss of her compliance. Even the Wraxall landscape had altered with his feverish, desirous state of mind – each glade became a potential trysting spot, each hollow a place where they might lie down. He winced with embarrassment as he recalled how even the great oak stretching upwards to the sky at that particularly significant angle, with its veiny bark twisting around its girth, symbolised the enormity of his love. Laughable if it weren't so painful. So many questions still tortured him. What had her life been since? Could he have prevented her being sent away?

But his mother had been indomitable. Neither he nor Grace were any match for her. Elizabeth had championed their cause, actually shouting – as much in defence of Grace as him. It was the first and only time he'd heard Elizabeth shout with fury. Her muslin dress shook with rage.

As the gun salute to the Phaeton rolled around the harbour, Henry remembered how he'd fallen to his knees before his mother to beg, desperately citing Mr Foulger in Nailsea who'd married the governess after his wife's death. He was almost of age, he should choose his own wife, and a governess wasn't exactly a servant – but Mother's hands were shaking as she rang the bell. Her lips were white. He was manhandled to the nursery by the menservants, and locked in. Humiliation swept over him as the bolt slid into place.

Within an hour Grace was banished, disgraced. He'd looked down from the window when he heard a carriage. As his mother led her out, he'd shouted and banged on the glass, but Grace didn't seem to hear him. All he could see was her bowed head. When the carriage pulled up in the drive he punched through the window, scattering shards of glass.

'Grace! GRACE!'

Her small shoulders. The toe of her boot peeping beneath her skirts. Everything was shrunken – the bag handed onto the roof, her pale, averted face, the slender stem of her neck. She'd looked up as his mother hastened her into the carriage, her hand on Grace's back. It wasn't quite a push. He ran to the nursery door and kicked and kicked until he broke through a panel, then shoved his arm through to reach the bolt. Blood smeared the white door as he stretched for the handle. But by the time he got downstairs the carriage was gone. His mother had him locked in an outhouse before he could saddle up a horse to give chase.

When he contemplated it now he felt ashamed; he should have done more.

'Re-inforcements for the French,' Roberts observed.

Even though Roberts was a master of stating the obvious, it took Henry a moment to come back to the present.

'Shall we go down?'

Henry shook his head. 'I'll wait here. Look!'

A rowing boat was lowered from the Phaeton. It began making its way towards the Salamander instead of the shore.

‘I’ll wait too.’ Roberts gazed towards the approaching boat. ‘Please God there’s something for me.’

Henry closed his eyes and waited to hear the sound of oars. What kind of man was he now? One who was never going to mislead a woman again. He’d determined on that, and he’d kept that promise, at least. His attempts to find Grace had brought him into contact with many women who’d been betrayed and disgraced; they’d strengthened both his guilt and his resolve. There weren’t many options available to a ruined woman.

After a while he heard the oars splash, not long before the occupants of the boat called out. He and Roberts leaned over the rails. Henry was relieved to have something to occupy him other than his own regrets. Two Frenchmen sat in the boat below, one of them holding up a pale package. They declined to come on board, but placed the bundle of letters wrapped in sailcloth in the basket that was lowered. Henry was always gratified at this international etiquette, the recognition of the hunger for news from home, wherever that might be, regardless of relations between the nations. Such packets may have been passed from ship to ship across many oceans, and many months. They were likely to be at least six months old, but word from loved ones was always precious. Roberts called down their thanks.

Henry unwrapped the sailcloth. Straight away he spotted a black edge in the bundle of letters – mourning, or a recent death? Father? Quickly, he pulled out the one with the mourning band. His heart sank as he saw it was addressed to him, in his mother’s handwriting. His father must have succumbed to the final stages of his illness. Immediately, the gravity of duty pressed down. His mother and sisters would be alone; it would be a long while before he reached home. He stood up straight, bracing himself. They were used to coping with father as a burden; now they would at least be relieved of that onerous and poignant duty. He turned to Roberts, handing him the rest of the letters.

‘I’ll be in my quarters. You distribute these.’

Roberts nodded silently – it was clear he’d noticed the black band.

Sitting at his desk, Henry gazed out of the porthole for a while before he could bring himself to break his mother's seal. It was a slim letter, and her handwriting looked shaky. As he picked up his letter knife, he remembered his father giving it to him during one of his more lucid spells, remarking on the importance letters would gain while he was away at sea. The silver handle was chased with rabbits and running deer, to remind him of Wraxall, he said. Henry held the knife in his hand, reluctant to plunge into the tidings of woe he was about to read. His father had been a kind man before his illness took hold of him, before he began to rant so recklessly.

They'd all loved him as a father deserves, but it was hard to maintain respect for the shambling, foulmouthed creature he became. His father's worsening syphilis had strengthened his vow of personal continence. Both the example before him and his own mistakes reminded him of the lifelong costs of such indulgence. The Admiral had suffered, and forced all those around him to suffer. At least mother would no longer have to manage his daily care. She and his sisters would be able to go into society again without fear of indiscretion and shame.

As he slid the knife under the seal, Henry was hoping it had been a peaceful death. He'd always feared that his father would die in one of his rages, when his frustration and confusion provoked him to reckless abuse as well as physical resistance. He'd struck Henry's mother on occasion, and called her the most filthy names; whore, harlot, cunt. She'd developed icy stoicism in response. When Henry unfolded the letter and smoothed it out on his table he had to read the opening sentence several times over before he could make any sense of it.

My dearest son,

It is with the heaviest heart I must tell you that your beloved sister Elizabeth has left us. She caught a chill less than a week ago, when she was visiting on my birthday, which quickly flared into a dreadful fever. Although she struggled bravely through four days and nights, her poor exhausted frame could not support the battle. As you know, it

is not so long since she had her last child, and I fear she hadn't regained full health. She left us quietly in the early morning as Prudence and I watched over her. It was as if she slipped out of the room. It's unbearable that she won't slip back, but bear it we must –

Elizabeth? Slipped out? He could read no further. Henry stood up, holding onto the table. His legs were unsteady. There was more, a whole page of it, but he couldn't read on. Checking the date, he saw that it had been sent eight months ago – two months after he'd embarked. He turned the paper over, his own hands strangely far away, his mother's handwriting both familiar and terrible. Stupidly, he read the envelope, knowing it made no sense to check, but nonetheless compelled to, hoping for some mistake. No, it was addressed to him. Eliza was dead.

Not his father.

It was Eliza who'd been with him in his most dreadful hours, the only one of his family with whom he felt truly at ease, for whom he remained a good person. He stumbled about his cabin until he stopped in front of one of his watercolours – a landscape of the shore with the forest behind. The branches of the trees made a thick canopy, while the green space beneath them was empty and peaceful. Suddenly the whole ship around him was too close, too busy; his chest felt compressed, as if he needed more air. All he could think of was escape - into the green air under those trees. He needed a quiet place to take this - this letter, to read it in peace. Folding it up, his hands barely working, he placed it inside his shirt. No one else could touch it. As he pushed it inside, the paper slid across his chest, cool as an arrowhead.

Taking his water bag, he went up on deck, pointed to a rowing boat and ordered it lowered. Despite the pain in his chest, he held himself upright. He took a draught from the water bag to steady himself. The sailors looked askance when he ordered them out, refusing their offers to row, but no one dared question him. He sucked in mouthfuls of air, his back straight as a rod. Get away. He needed to get away. Throwing his water bag in ahead of him, he climbed into the boat. Roberts hastened over as the boat was being lowered.

‘Would you like me to come with you, Sir?’

‘No. You take command.’ Henry heard his own voice as if it belonged to someone else. It felt unreliable, an instrument he couldn’t control.

‘Sir, at least take a couple of men with you –’ Roberts peered over, shading his eyes from the sun.

Henry didn’t respond.

Roberts’ face was all concern, but sympathy was dangerous.

‘Sir? It might be wise -’

‘No. No need.’ It was impossible to talk. He wasn’t going to explain with the men present. He couldn’t trust his voice. Surely Roberts could grasp that.

‘But Captain, you don’t look well. Jenkins here could row you –’

‘NO.’

Gripping the oars, he met Roberts’ concerned gaze. The company of his men was the last thing he wanted. At last Roberts nodded, drawing back over the rails.

‘Sir.’

The rowing boat plonked into the water, and Henry set off towards the shore, concentrating hard on rowing, feeling the eyes of his crew on him, watching the ship diminish as he heaved on the oars. Pull – and pull. Pull – and pull. His back and legs strained. His breath sawed in and out. Each heave on the oars was a fury of disbelief. She couldn’t be dead. Once near the shore, he slowed down to navigate clumps of coral under the water. She couldn’t be. It was ridiculous. Avoiding the place where they usually landed, he rowed towards a secluded bay – one that wasn’t in sight of the Salamander. When he got there he didn’t want to stop rowing, but he made himself stop, grinding the boat into the sand. She’d been so full of life when she came to see him off.

He jumped out into the shallows and dragged the boat up the beach. Thankfully, there was no one on shore; no one to look at him, just black sand and coco palms. Soaked to the thighs with seawater, he set off towards the forest, stumbling uphill until he reached the trees. Pushing through the undergrowth, he made his way into the shade, blundering

upwards until he collapsed against the trunk of a mape tree. Its grey buttresses curved out like opening arms. He slid down against the bark, his back protected, hidden inside the high roots. It felt like shelter. His shirt was damp. He reached inside and pulled out the letter, but instead of opening it, held it in his hands.

A strange sound disturbed the space around him – shaking through the air. It was wretched, a ragged wailing. It sounded as if an animal was in pain, as if the teeth of a trap were biting into tender flesh. The noise ranged about in the greenery surrounding him. It stopped when he drew breath.

It was coming from him.

Chapter 14

In the night, Atea woke herself up, sobbing, sure there were Oui-oui soldiers inside the hut. Her voice was squeezed with fear as she cried out into the darkness, and slowly, she understood that she was dreaming, that the shadows were not men crouching. When all the men were dead, who would stop the night-crawlers? Taaroa didn't stop them, or Hina, or any of the other gods. She lay in the dark until the pink breath of dawn blew across the sea. All of the trees filled with spirit houses, all the birds fat on flesh torn from corpses. The stench would be more than all the tiare flowers. No one could stop their ships.

She went to wash herself at the beach, dousing her head in cool water. She stood in the sea, deciding to make oil to massage Miri, and to scent it with tiare flowers - something good to do in the day that stretched before her. Soon, when her scars were healed, she'd go to Raiatea and fetch Hauata back, if she wanted to come. When she was strong enough to look in her eyes and talk with her about Temana. Thinking of it made her afraid. Did Hauata have any love left for her?

Wading out of the lagoon, she wandered along the shore to the place where her family trees grew. It was a surprise to see a boat was pulled up on the sand, a popa'a boat from one of the ships. She'd never seen one left there before; it was odd to see it leaning on its side, only just out of the water. Usually the popa'a made a fuss about pulling their boat up on the sand, tying it up as if it might wander away on its own. She went closer. The boat smelt of sadness.

One man's footsteps walked away from the empty boat, towards the forest. The emptiness left in the hull made her heart ache. Not wanting to be near the sadness, she walked on. She had enough sadness. There were plenty of coconuts on the ground, so she gathered them into a pile, silently thanking the trees. She threw a pretty one into the sea as a gift for Hina and a heavy one back into the forest as a gift for Taaroa, then put the rest in the net she'd brought. Before she carried them back she sat down to rest in the shade, gazing at

the colours of the sea. She could see the ship where the captain made her picture. All those fingers and toes. All those ships. How could their warriors defeat them if more and more ships always came? Then she heard a strange sound coming from the forest. It was a howl, thin and wandering, full of pain. A woman in labour? But only Miri was near her time, and she was at home. A birth that was coming too early?

The howl came again. It wasn't so far away, but not so close either. She knelt up and listened as it faltered out of the forest, somewhere above the beach. Should she go up? It was a desolate, empty sound, not the purposeful groans of a woman giving birth. It was a howl of aloneness. It must be the popa'a who'd left the boat, but that was strange - they were never usually alone; they lived in their ship all crammed together, and when they came to shore they came together. Whoever he was, he sounded as if he needed help. She couldn't walk away from such a sound, but she didn't want to walk towards it.

So Atea stayed where she was, within sight of the boat but not too near. The popa'a sailor would come back. Sitting on the sand, she gazed out to sea, watching the spray leap along the reef. Small flies danced about her feet and ankles. After a while, the wailing waned, but she stayed, waiting. She could run away fast if he was frightening. The sun moved across the sky, sea birds stretched out their wings high above the waves. The warm sand held her, calming her, resting her. It was late afternoon when a man walked out of the forest shadows. He stopped and rubbed his face in the sunlight. Straightaway she knew him. All of him looked weary.

'Tapitane Henry -' she called out, getting to her feet.

He looked dazed, as if he hardly knew who she was, but he didn't seem hurt - he wasn't limping or curled over with pain. Unsure, she stayed where she was. He could choose to come towards her, or go to his boat. Perhaps he wanted to be alone. He stood and blinked. His clothes were patched with sweat, his arms hung loose at his sides. Perhaps he couldn't see who she was. She called out his name again, then he raised his hand to shade his eyes against the sun. Slowly, as if she might startle him, she moved a few steps towards him.

When they'd been on his ship he'd been careful of her, not speaking loudly, not coming too close.

Then he came towards her, almost stumbling, as if he might fall. He looked worn out from his howling.

When he got close he didn't say anything, he just looked at her.

'You went in the forest,' she said. He nodded. He was a strange colour – almost grey. His eyes were dark all around. 'You look tired, Tapitane. Sit. Sit over here. The sand is warm here.'

She pointed to the place where she'd been sitting. He looked there, then he looked towards his boat. When he looked at his boat, she knew he didn't want to go back to his ship, not yet. His face was full of difficulty.

'Do you want coco milk?' she asked, pointing to her net of coconuts.

He glanced at the coconuts and shook his head. Atea walked to the spot she'd pointed out, and sat down. Looking at him, she patted the sand beside her. He looked so lost; all she wanted was to let him come back to himself. He looked as if his spirit had gone on a long journey. Slowly, he came and stood near, still and silent. She looked away, as cautious as if he were a bird that might be startled. He seemed wounded - different to the man he'd been in the wooden room with his ship all around him. Then he'd been relaxed, confident and kind; now he stood before her as if the mana was squeezed out of his body.

'Come, sit.'

He moved as if he were asleep and dreaming. He sat beside her, without speaking, but she didn't mind. Neither of them spoke. Instead, they sat in silence, watching the sun sinking towards sleep. Colours drenched through the clouds above the horizon, spreading across the sky, soaking the sand and their skin in goodbye warmth. Henry was as still as the pile of coconuts. The pinks and reds of sunset spread over her. The air was hot.

She was glad it was Captain Henry who'd come, not someone else. A strange howling popa'a would be frightening, but she wasn't scared of him, she was sorry with him - without even looking she could feel his body, tight with misery, pressed into itself. She

wanted to stretch against him like Mrs Coe's cat, to help him let the sadness free. His misery made her tender; willing to lie close to him, to warm him with her own flesh - but she wasn't sure he wanted comfort. Palm leaves rustled behind them. Hina of the sea mingled her breath with Hina of the within. Hina wanted them to put their breath together.

As the sun dipped down into the edge of the sea, Atea felt warm all over, down to the ends of her fingers, the arches of her feet. It was a long while since she'd felt like this, even with Temana. He'd been lost to her, drinking and being angry, and since he'd gone she'd been lost, too. But she was surprised to enjoy Henry's closeness; she felt herself opening to him as he sat, hunched in his hurting.

He was as tight as the ropes on his ship – many threads twisted together, turned and turned until they were hard as stones. The light around him quivered with his tightness.

Small waves rolled onto the dark sand, soft and easy. Slowly, slowly the sun sank into the sea, its goodnight colours spread out in burning bars across the sky. Atea waited. His men didn't sit this long – they were quick to grab whenever they could, sometimes even when there was no sign. Too quick, Meherio said; the women often had to calm the popa'a sailors, to slow them down into pleasure. But she knew he wasn't stopping himself. In his heart he was still howling.

Silence sat between them.

She'd heard that sometimes if a popa'a man had his own woman at home, he wouldn't love other women, but that was rare. Henry was captain - he had many men to lead. He had good mana. But he sat there, wrapped as closely as a parcel of food. She didn't want to break him open.

Feeling the longing in her grow, she watched the water. The sea winked with the goodbye colours of the sun. Perhaps he'd get up and go to his boat. She was surprised that she hoped he wouldn't.

At last he put his hand down in the sand between them.

He left it there as if it was separate from him.

Ah hia. Easiness spread into her chest. Small gold hairs were lit up on the back of his hand, along his wrist. He was asking for nothing. His gesture was tender. His hand was so beautiful she wanted to lick it. Slowly, she slid her hand over his. Their skin met with a shock. He sighed, shuddering. She covered his hand, warmth captured between them. The waves breathed in and out on the shore.

He didn't take his hand away.

She felt as if she was waking up from a too long sleep. All of her was gentle but humming. There was no hurry; she was happy to be there with him, without words. As the light faded and a breeze blew from the sea, he shifted around and leaned back against her. He eased down into the sand, resting his head on her lap. Whatever was wrong, his pain pulled at hers and made it his companion. Darkness thickened around them.

Lifting his hand, Atea brushed away the sand, carefully rolling each grain away until his hand was clean. She pressed her lips into the dry hollow of his palm.

A groan leaked out of him.

Chapter 15

Early next morning Henry stood on the quarterdeck, looking out over the sea towards Pape'ete, clouded with thought. Atea. It had been so comforting to be held. Had that really happened? Had he let her cuddle him like a hurt child? He felt abstracted, not himself at all. Light danced on the water; too bright, too exultant. He'd been vulnerable as a pup. Thank Heavens no one had seen. Thank Heavens that was all – and holding was enough.

A couple of sailors dragged a goat up from the lower decks, taking it to the bows for slaughter. Watching it being pulled along, a hand grasping each of its horns, its hooves skidding on the scrubbed deck, he could feel the resistance in its body as if it were his own. As its hooves scraped frantically on the boards he was surprised by a rush of fellow feeling. What was the matter with him? Suddenly he wanted to cry out 'Stop! Don't kill it!'

Of course he didn't. The goat cried out with the same tremulous anxiety that used to make his father's voice so insistent, and so pathetic. Up on the quarterdeck, in his usual place, Henry felt as if he didn't have enough skin. Eliza was dead, and he still wanted to refuse the knowledge, but he pressed his lips together and turned his gaze back to Pape'ete. Atea. He stood still as a figurehead while his thoughts ricocheted from grief to longing then back again to misery. The goat's bleats were cut short. Atea. Breathing in the warm breeze, he wanted to be held again, to be close against her ease.

Perhaps she'd be coming down to the sea to wash. The morning sun laid out a shining path across the sea from ship to shore, although he snorted with impatience at his own sentimentality, yet at the same time he wanted to indulge it. How hard it had been to get up from the sand yesterday, to walk to his boat – and row away from her, back to the ship. He was tempted to take a boat immediately, to go and look for her – but what were her feelings for him?

Perhaps she had no feelings for him – or not the longing he felt. She'd simply realised his distress and held him – that was all. He shouldn't indulge himself in romantic imaginings; it was a bad example. He would not follow in his father's footsteps - to

profligacy and dissolution; he'd promised himself. Yet, then he imagined finding her on the beach again, and pulling her to him ...

Roberts approached him with the obvious uneasiness of a man approaching the grieving. Henry immediately felt sorry for him. As Roberts spoke, Henry tried hard to concentrate, watching his lips, his arms stiff at his sides.

'Sir. Thank the Lord you're back.'

Henry nodded, looking out to sea, sparing them both the difficulty of each other's gaze. 'I lost track of time.'

'It must have been a dreadful shock.' Roberts spoke as if to an invalid. Here was sympathy, however awkward. Roberts was beginning to perspire, the red stripes of his cheeks signalling his discomfort.

'Yes. Wanted to be alone for a bit.' At last he looked Roberts in the eye. 'Went up into the forest.'

Roberts shifted his feet. 'At least your mother won't be so burdened now - with his care, I mean...'

For a moment, Henry was confused, then he realised that Roberts thought his father was dead. So he had to say it.

'No. It was my sister.' He frowned into the sun. 'My twin sister. Elizabeth is dead.' The words dropped from his lips, lifeless as shoes. 'Not my father.'

It took Roberts a moment. Henry put his hands on the rail. It was cool and steady.

'Elizabeth? Your sister? But I thought it was -' Roberts shook his head, squinting up at Henry against the light. 'I'm so sorry - I mean, it would be a shock if ...your father, and a terrible shame, of course, but, still - your sister? Surely she was only... Hadn't she just had a child? Was it that fever that can strike afterwards -'

'Puerperal fever. No. It wasn't that, but it was a fever. She'd had the child a few months before - not regained her strength, perhaps...' He glanced at Roberts. 'I thought it was my father, too, at first...' He paused, unable to think of anything else to say. 'It was a shock - I needed some - privacy. I had to go ashore -'

‘I’m so sorry.’

Henry could feel Roberts looking at him. Suddenly he couldn’t bear the weight of his concern; he couldn’t bear to stand on deck in full view of the crew with Roberts scrutinising him. There was nothing to be said; he didn’t want to regurgitate his mother’s letter - he hadn’t even digested it himself. He couldn’t talk about Eliza; he couldn’t trust himself, neither did he want to stand in silence as poor Roberts strained to think of something to say.

‘Listen, Roberts, I need some rest. I’ll be below. You take command.’

Roberts saluted. Henry went down to his quarters.

The following hours were scrambled. Memories of Eliza alternated with a sharp craving to go ashore. Cook sent broth, and Henry tried chewing some bread, but it lodged in his throat as if it were hot from the oven. It seemed impossible to swallow anything. He paced his cabin, drifting, in a jumble, while the fat in the broth cooled to form white discs. ‘They went to sea in a sieve, they did, in a sieve they went to sea...’ He wished he’d written more often, to all of them; Eliza, mother, Prudence, father even. Thoughts of reading Lear’s verses together, Eliza mending his hacking jacket, riding on the common in the early morning. Mist mingled with their horses’ breath. Even the twisted hawthorns looked picturesque with spangled spiders’ webs strung between their witchy branches. Elizabeth’s hair escaped from its pins as she cantered ahead of him. She called him to race her – her face as clear in the cold as if it were cut out of the morning. He could feel hooves thumping on the damp ground. When he’d let her win, she waved her crop at him, scolding; ‘But you let me, didn’t you?’ He gazed out of his windows at mists curling around the high green peaks of Tahiti. ‘They sailed to the Western Sea, they did, to a land all covered with trees, and they bought an Owl and a useful cart, and a pound of rice and a cranberry tart, and a hive of silvery Bees...’ Yearning to see Atea crept through his body. Was it shameful to be so drawn to her?

It didn't feel like lust. They'd done nothing other than hold each other, and he'd torn himself away in spite of his longing. Was he foolish to deny himself? Continence and control had been his bywords for so many years, since Grace. And his father too - his example of louche disregard, his syphilitic madness, and the years of suffering for all of them - it all chimed in Henry's head like a warning bell. He could barely believe that he'd been so familiar with Atea, and that she'd been so willing too, simply holding him. He didn't even know how long they'd been together on the beach. It got dark; the stars came out, the sea washed at the sand. Her body anchored him as the waves welled and subsided. 'The water it soon came in, it did, the water it soon came in.'

His twin was gone, who'd always been with him. He rubbed the mark over his right eye where she'd hit him with a wooden block, arguing over building castles. They'd hidden together in their gloomy den under the rhododendron, learned to ride on the same irritable pony. And she'd noticed, when no one else did, his love for Grace, that he imagined he hid so well. He stopped pacing and took the small portrait he'd painted off his wall. Eliza: smiling and thoughtful.

He lay down in his hammock. Favour jumped up and wriggled along his side, until he cupped her small, warm skull in his palm. He couldn't weep; the walls were too thin and he was Captain. He curled on his side around the dog. Atea. There in his quarters, with his desk and ewer and basin, of course he knew such a liaison was unsuitable. If Roberts, or any of his officers, were inclined towards such an indulgence, of course he'd warn against it. He must resist.

Exhausted, Henry dozed.

When he woke he re-read his mother's letter, then attempted a letter to Prudence and his mother, but found he'd no words of comfort to offer. Everything he attempted to say was banal, hollow, pointless. He sat in his chair, pen in hand, staring at Eliza's portrait. She'd understood how he felt about Father. She'd shared his mixture of horror and affection. There were so many memories; they'd borne their father's outbursts so often.

‘Give me a nice wet cunt to stick my fingers in.’ Father’s face had been jocular, beaming, without a trace of shame. As usual there was no preamble.

‘Come along, girls.’

Mother’s tone was clipped as she got up to leave. Her head bent as she rolled up her silks and pushed them into her sewing bag. Prudence looked almost hysterical, while Elizabeth shot a sympathetic look at Henry. As mother walked across the room, she cast a glance at her sick husband that shocked Henry to the pit of his stomach. It was a look of pure dislike.

Henry stroked Favour as he remembered how he’d watched in stricken silence, knowing he should say something, while nothing at all sprang to mind.

‘Nice clean girls, fresh from the country -’

Father had nodded at him as if he were some old friend. He was drooling, as he often did. Once he realised he was drooling, he was in the habit of wiping his spittle on the arms of his chair. Henry recalled how he’d always tried to intercept this action, wiping his father’s face with a square of dry flannel. He couldn’t bear to see his chin shining with saliva.

Henry heaved up out of his hammock and went to his window, hoping the panorama outside would distract him. The mountains ranged around the harbour, and bright blue waves sparkled beneath, but his memories persisted.

‘Mmm.’ Father had dried his face on his sleeves like a child. ‘What, are they gone? Such pretty girls. I like those ones, when you can smell the hay on them, eh?’

‘Very pretty,’ Henry recalled his own acid reply. ‘Your daughters, remember? My sisters; Elizabeth and Prudence.’

He’d only been eighteen, yet he’d felt more mature than his own father. All these years later he could still taste the disgust. And now Eliza was dead. Why wasn’t it father instead? But that was wrong; he was ashamed at the thought. Going to his basin, he splashed his face. All he wanted was Atea, yet he couldn’t become like his father; dissolute, revolting.

But it didn’t feel like that.

Favour whined at his feet. He bent down to stroke her again, wetting her ears with his damp hands. Someone was knocking at his door. It was Roberts; apparently the Consul, Mr Miller, had arrived, demanding to see him. Roberts offered to take care of the matter, but Henry decided perhaps a diversion might help. Almost at once Mr Miller came in, bristling with important things to say.

‘Well now, Captain, Sir, I’ve come to alert you to A Most Grave Transgression, in the Earnest Hope that you can help me resolve The Matter.’

‘Good day to you, sir.’

‘Good day.’

‘Do sit down.’

Miller sat, launching into his speech with the speed of the incensed.

‘Well now, as you know, the consulate shares an area of yard with the mission house occupied by Mr Newsome - an area of ground owned by the consulate, I’ll have you understand – and this is a gentleman who seems sorely lacking in matters of etiquette, which you must agree are so important at this remove from Home and Empire...’

Mr Miller was clearly vexed. He bounced on his chair as if he’d far rather be pacing about the room. A wearisome discourse followed on the Etiquette for the Feeding of Horses in relation to Persons of Rank. Henry felt dazed. He took no part in this tirade, and neither could he muster his usual amusement. He found himself drifting off, thinking of their childhood horse instead of Newsome’s. It had beautiful eyelashes and a ridiculous prancing tail; both Eliza and Prudence were practically in love with the beast. Star, they called it.

‘I was just sitting down to enjoy cold meats, and some parrotfish brought to me that morning – cooked by Mrs Miller herself, good and fresh as can be -’

Henry shook his head. Did the man really need to detail his meal?

‘And out came the nag, led by the nose, then she was quite simply left in Full View of my window. Surely he can see I’m at my Meal, I thought –’ Miller employed flourishing hand gestures as he meandered on...’ But no – he brings a mat, an Old Hempen Mat I’ll have you know, and drops it on the ground before his mare. I could swear he looked up at me

before he walked away, as if to show, you know, the Sheer Deliberation of the Act...of his Impertinence!’

Henry looked around his quarters. It struck him that all he saw was insubstantial; Miller’s sweating face, his own inept watercolours on the walls, even the cabin walls themselves. It all seemed ludicrous, trivial.

‘- and so I was obliged to write a letter, Warning the Horse off, whereupon Mr Newsome replied that the Consulate stood on Mission Ground without Permission – and Warned Me Off by return! Well, I -’

‘I beg your pardon - did you say you wrote a letter to the horse?’ Henry interrupted. He could barely believe the fellow. ‘Does the horse read?’ He knew he shouldn’t mock, but if this was the sum of Miller’s earthly trials, he was a lucky man. ‘I’m not sure I can grasp the exact nature of your complaint, sir. Do you prefer the nag to have a more fitting meal, or is it the lack of a dining table that offends you?’

Miller’s eyes bulged. He made a huffing noise as if preparatory to speech or movement, something like a steam train setting off. His brass waistcoat buttons strained at his ample belly.

‘I understand that the days can drag a little, but -’ Henry inadvertently released a snort of unstoppable laughter. ‘Do you think I have nothing better to do than to listen to this – drivel?’

The word drivel slid from his lips with such wicked pleasure. Miller’s face deepened to puce. Henry’s chuckling, once started, persisted. Could Miller’s eyes pop any more? Henry leaned onto the back of a chair, and Favour jumped up on it, wagging her tail. The outrage Miller manifested was impressive; the veins in his forehead corrugated his skin, while his bloodshot eyes ranged about the room as if seeking some invisible deity. Once again he began to reiterate the particulars of the mare’s meal, carefully, as if there was some element the Captain hadn’t understood.

‘It was nothing less than a piece of Old Matting, Sir, would you Credit it - Dreadfully Frayed - so Tough it took a Great Deal of Chewing, believe me...’

‘I heard you -’ Henry was so choked he had difficulty speaking. ‘Can you not be glad – thank the lord - that your own meal was - so superior?’ Henry had to wipe the tears from his own eyes.

‘Captain Sir, this is No Jest - I’ve come to you in good faith – now you’re insulting me when I expected a Sensible Ear -‘

‘Perhaps you should fetch a little present for the mare? A pretty nosebag, or a finely carved water trough? She must be wounded that you’ve ‘warned her off’ – that you so dislike her manners -‘

Miller was open mouthed. ‘Captain, I have to say I object most strenuously -‘

‘Please don’t,’ Henry gasped.

If Miller were any more strenuous he’d surely burst. The Consul strutted out of the Captain’s quarters, his chest puffed like an affronted bantam’s. Henry flopped back into his hammock, worn out, wheezing with hilarity.

Not long after Miller’s exit, Roberts knocked and came in. Tentatively, he enquired if all was well. Clearly Mr Miller had reported on his interview. Henry rubbed his face with his hands. Still lying in his hammock, he dismissed Roberts. However, Roberts, instead of taking the order, placed his feet further apart and stayed where he was.

‘Mr Miller was most put out, Sir.’

‘Oh Roberts, I didn’t mean to offend,’ replied Henry, throwing his legs down and sitting up, ‘but that man really does take the blasted ship’s biscuit. Do you know what he was talking about? Some imagined insult from a horse, for crying out loud! Is he affected by the heat, do you think? For Heaven’s sakes – he’s written the horse a letter! What in the name of God does he expect?’

‘I know, Sir. A most tiresome man, I agree - and normally you’d handle him with your usual aplomb, of course, but right now...’ Roberts took a deep breath. ‘He is the Consul. Might I suggest - perhaps some shore leave would be helpful? Some compassionate leave? You’ve had a shock, after all.’

Henry didn’t answer, so Roberts continued.

‘I’ve secured a place on shore where you could take a few days rest – not in Pape’ete, but a short distance along the coast, in a secluded spot. It’s the house of a local man – Vane – who’s amenable to you staying there a while. No one need know you’re there. It’s a safe place, Sir, and you wouldn’t be bothered by visitors.’

In all his seriousness, Roberts reminded him of a small boy scrubbed up for a visit to an elderly aunt. A secluded spot.

‘I have to admit I’m weary of Miller and his like.’

Roberts nodded. ‘You shouldn’t be concerning yourself with trifling matters at a time like this - you’ve listened to petty petitions for weeks on end now - sometimes I marvel at your good humour. And there’s mostly nothing to be done about them, anyway. In most cases I’m sure I could manage, I’ll just tell them to put it in writing like you do. It would allow you some respite ...’

Roberts paused.

‘Go on -’

‘Just for a short period of mourning - after all, there’s nothing urgent, and you won’t be far away -’

Henry shook his head. He wanted nothing more than to go, but if he did, would he succumb to temptation?

Roberts seemed encouraged by his silence.

‘I could put any important callers off, and if anything notable happens I’ll send word. All seems as usual with the French, and the men are in good form. Perhaps you would allow me to take command - for as long as necessary? You’ve often said I need to be more authoritative.’

Henry appreciated the delicacy of his approach; Roberts was obviously concerned, as well as embarrassed at having to make such a suggestion. His boots appeared to be of inordinate interest. His wariness itself gave Henry pause for thought. If his behaviour had become so disconcerting for Roberts, then perhaps he did need some respite. His First Lieutenant was looking at him as if he were on the verge of insanity. Suddenly Henry felt

exhausted. The quiet of a house on shore would be a relief. The absence of duties and visitors appealed even more. And perhaps he could see her...

‘Very well then,’ Henry replied. ‘Yes. It will do you good to have a taste of command.’

‘Most definitely, Sir. I shall appreciate the opportunity.’

Apparently satisfied with his own powers of persuasion, Roberts saluted and left. Henry stretched. It was as if a constricting band had been removed from his head. A welcome rest. There was only one person he wanted to see in that house. He didn’t have to be his father. It was a distance from Pape’ete, so she need not visit – unless she wanted to.

Chapter 16

Atea and Miri listened to Heremanu talking about Vane's house. The English captain was going to stay there. Vane had gone to be with his daughter at Faa'a since his son had been killed fighting the Oui-ouis. Someone was wanted to prepare the house for him, to wash his clothes and get him food. Atea was quiet. She felt herself opening like a pipi shell when she thought of him.

Miri leaned back against the hut, her face moving into the shade. 'I don't want to walk that far every day.'

Atea knew what Miri thought of the popa'a. They went to women as if they'd walked a long way to a feast, cramming their mouths, too busy to give thanks, too hungry to feel the welcome. Sometimes Miri went to the palm groves with a popa'a, if she wanted to get a nail to give her husband, but she laughed about it afterwards – their clumsiness, the smell of them. Atea had never been with a popa'a man. Most husbands didn't mind, but Temana was so angry and jealous.

'Perhaps Tiare will go,' said Heremanu. 'She's young, she won't mind the walk. She can make pretty garlands -'

'I'll do it. I'll sweep out Vane's house,' Atea said.

'Will you?' Miri looked surprised. 'Well, I'm glad not to be sweeping it... Vane hasn't been there for a while.' Her belly was wide and stretched; the baby was lying sideways – she rubbed the tight skin as she spoke.

Atea thought that she might try to turn the baby soon, if it didn't move itself. 'You're getting so big, and it's hot. I can go to Vane's and look after the tapitane - it's easier for me.'

Miri smiled. 'Maururu.' Perhaps she knew there was more than being easier. 'If you want to...'

'I do. How long will he be here?'

‘I don’t know. Some days. You’ll be good at looking after him.’ She looked at Atea closely. ‘We don’t know why he’s coming. Maybe he’s ill...’

‘I’ll look after him. I can stay with him - if he wants me to.’

Miri raised her eyebrows. ‘Good. If he’s ill, we could do lomi lomi.’

There was silence. Miri was happy for her to take comfort from a popa’a – but he wasn’t any popa’a. Atea didn’t want to talk about what was between them already; a picture that showed what he saw, and one long holding. She made her farewells and left. Popa’a were strange. Maybe he wouldn’t want to be with her. She knew he hadn’t wanted to be with other women in Pape’ete who liked him.

She put on a fresh pareo and walked along the shore towards Vane's house, cooling her feet in the waves. There were some popa'a who could allow embraces to warm their hearts, she knew there were. Tehani had nothing bad to say about her Johnson; they loved each other. Some of the popa'a settlers had Tahitian wives and children. With every ship that came, more sailors wanted to stay and rest in the love that opened to them. All she knew was she was drawn to him.

Some days, Miri said. He was a popa’a; he would leave again. She remembered tapitane Henry coming out of the forest, his skin mottled with mosquito bites, his face streaked with dirt. Being close to him then woke up her body. When he touched her, she was herself again, not a woman with badness cut into her face. Would he want to be with her?

As she walked to Vane's house, she picked ferns and tiare flowers. She carried a net of food; breadfruit, vi, and fish caught by Heremanu that morning, and she laid the greenery on top. All the while, she watched for popa'a boats. Vane’s house kept to itself in a lonely bay; Vane liked to be with the moods of the sea. When she got there she went in and spoke to the spirits, telling them she had come to make it ready. Then she wrapped a bundle of ferns and swept the rafters, walls and floor, cleaning away cobwebs and insects and bits of leaf.

When she picked the sleeping mat up off the floor to carry it out there was a pattern from the weaving pressed into the smooth ground. She remembered kneeling in her own house, scraping away the dirt under her sleeping mat. Temana had come in and found her making the hole.

'What are you hiding?' He saw the bundle beside her. 'What's that – a present from your lover?'

Too often he was angry. He'd looked at her with suspicion as she handed him the bundle of bark cloth. He wasn't pleased when he unwrapped it.

'Pouaras.' His face was dark.

He looked at the two small figures on the bark cloth, a boy and a girl, one with his arms wrapped around his belly, one with her hands to her mouth. Their eyes were shut fast; they were beautiful, smooth and untroubled. Herenui made them smaller than new babies, so they'd be easier to hide. Didn't Temana remember holding her during the births? Didn't he remember burying them?

'You know they're not allowed.' He held them out.

'I need to have them with me. No one else will know.' She picked up the girl, held her to her mouth. The wood smelt green. Atea's stomach clenched.

He didn't look at her. 'Other women do as the Pastor says.'

As she stood in Vane's house remembering, she understood that his love had gone long before she was ready to believe it. All the days when he shouted, when he came back from drinking with the Oui-ouis – those days hadn't told her that his love was gone. She'd told herself he was confused, hot with liquor. He was always angry after he was with the Oui-ouis, and when they went away he'd be her Temana again. That's what she'd told herself, but it wasn't true.

She swept over the pattern from Vane's mat, pushing the dust and insects onto a big leaf, then she carried them up behind the house and threw them back to the forest. There were mats and cloth in the rafters that she shook and laid out in the sun. After washing out the water gourds, she carried salt water up and sprinkled it on the swept floor. Last of all, she

brushed a neat pattern onto the floor, glad of the order she'd restored. Then she went to cool herself in the waves, floating, feeling how afraid she was. Maybe Hauata would stay in Raiatea forever; maybe she wouldn't come back. Maybe Hauata hated her for killing Temana.

Rolling over in the water, she began to swim. Temana had told her often about the popa'a wives who promised to stay with their husbands for always. Pastor Coe said the same. The popa'a way was best. The Tahitian way was to do what you felt, to leave if you wanted. She swam on her back, her thoughts going over and over as her arms went over and over in the water.

Once the sea had cooled her, she chose a spot under a coco palm and sat down to make garlands. Watching the sea, her fingers twisted stems and leaves, easing flowers into place. Vane's house was almost ready. She could leave. But when she imagined herself walking away, her body felt sad.

Perhaps he'd send her away.

It took a long while to make garlands. When they were done she hung them from the rafters, and tied them over the doorway of Vane's house. They called out welcome. Still there was no boat, but the sun was hot, so she rested inside in the shade, enjoying the scent of the flowers, the light moving on the walls.

Atea woke at the splash of oars. They sounded so different to paddles. Afraid he might not want her there, she got up and went to the doorway, looking out from the shade. It was too late to leave; already he was coming up the beach, with a bag pulling on one shoulder, looking tired and alone. The men in the boat pulled on their oars, leaving. She wanted to step out into the light, but perhaps he wanted to be alone? He was carrying his boots over his shoulder as well as his bag – but she couldn't see his face... She hesitated, watching his bent head. Then she took a breath and stepped out of the doorway, into the light.

Henry stopped. He dropped his bag. Letting his boots fall, he ran up the beach towards her.

Chapter 17

Henry woke to the sound of the waves, as gentle as Atea's breathing beside him. Thin pencils of light searched through the woven walls of the hut, patterning their bodies. He was sheened with sweat, unsettled by a dream of Grace embracing a young man, stroking his hair. Coming back to the present, he lay still, fighting a rush of angry misery. His arm was trapped under Atea's neck. He had no call to be jealous; Grace was gone from him. Why was she returning to haunt him now? The scent of tiare filled the hut, sweet as lilies. Eliza was dead. Using his free hand, he felt for his discarded shirt and wiped his face.

As he moved, Atea stirred, and opened her eyes.

She frowned as she looked at Henry, pushing her hair back from her sleepy face.

'What is it? Your sister?'

'And a dream. Someone I used to –' He hesitated for a moment before saying it; he hadn't spoken of it for so long. How would she take it? 'Someone I used to love.'

Atea stretched. 'I dreamt of ships like yours, coming across the sea to Tahiti. As many as when the whales come – more.' She sat up, rubbing her face. 'Who did you love?'

'She was my sisters' teacher, a long time ago. She gave them lessons in the day – French, and dancing - and in the evenings we learned the stars together. Her name was Grace.'

'You loved each other?'

Atea raised her eyebrows with obvious interest, but to his surprise, she seemed relaxed.

Henry smiled tentatively, not sure if this was an odd subject to be discussing.

'You're not jealous?'

'You're not a young man.' She smiled. 'You have had other lovers.'

He shrugged, oddly embarrassed to admit it. 'Only her.'

‘Only her?’ Atea bounced onto her knees to face him, her face suddenly alert. ‘But the other women say the popa’a have lovers everywhere they sail.’

‘Maybe they do. Maybe they say so.’ He thought of the brothel he’d been persuaded to visit in Lisbon. The tired, sallow woman asking him for the money first, closing the shutters in the tiny room. Her businesslike approach had been unnerving. His body responded, but he kept thinking that the Admiral had been to Lisbon, and wondering if his father could have been with this woman cast a pall over any pleasure. ‘I’m not sure those women call it love.’

‘Where is Grace?’

‘I don’t know. She was – punished. My mother sent her away because she didn’t want us to marry.’ It sounded so weak, and he didn’t want to seem weak to her. ‘I was young – she made me stay in a room...’ Did Tahitians ever lock someone up? Henry tried to think of words to describe the situation, but couldn’t. With their free ways, the shame of his liaison with Grace would be difficult to understand. ‘For a long time I searched for her. When I was back in England, back from my journeys on ships, I looked for her.’

‘Did you find her?’

Henry sighed. On these small islands, news seemed to travel very effectively by mouth; disappearing would be hard. ‘No. I didn’t find her.’ But what places he’d seen – secretly visiting dreadful lodging houses, workhouses, institutions for fallen women, following any clue he could find, and discovering instead what desperate choices there were for a woman with no family, and no-one to recommend her.

‘But you looked. How long did you look?’

‘Elizabeth told me to stop looking.’ He remembered the hopes he cherished each time he came on leave, and the devastation when he failed to find her, yet again. On his journeys he’d devise new plans, then on his leaves they’d be dashed, year after year. ‘I don’t even know if she is alive.’

‘How long?’

‘Sixteen years.’ He touched her hands. ‘All the fingers on both hands, and one foot. Almost half my life.’

Atea touched his face. ‘You are a good man, tapitane. Your love doesn’t fly away. I think your sister loved you, and she didn’t want sadness for you. That’s why she said stop.’

They got up and went to wash at the stream. Memories of Elizabeth shuddered through him as he splashed himself with cool water. Her happiness when she had her twins – when he’d visited on leave they were a few months old, and together they’d carried them out to the garden, each holding a bundle of frothy blankets as the babies raised up their pink arms to the light coming through the branches of the elm. The nurse fussed about him carrying his niece, but Eliza shushed her, then scolded him when he let the baby touch the dusty ivy hanging from the stable wall. Had the babies been taken to her grave under the yews? How old would they be now? He was so far away. Eliza had been dark-eyed and thin then, but joy had animated her in spite of her tiredness.

He and Atea sat on the beach, warming themselves, drying in the morning sun. Canoes paddled by, but no one came to the beach. Although the ship was only just out of sight round the bay, it felt blessedly distant. It was a relief not to have to deal with the decisions of life on board, nor the trail of visitors expecting him to provide solutions to their irksome problems. Henry imagined Roberts practising statesmanlike gravitas with the Millers and various less worthy rascals.

‘It’s good to have a rest from the ship.’

Atea was stroking the places where his tanned and sea-burnt skin faded into white, kissing his neck, the juncture of his forearms and elbows where he sometimes rolled up his sleeves.

‘Is it true what you said when you made the painting of me?’

Henry stretched. ‘What did I say?’

‘There are so many ships. All with soldiers inside.’

‘Yes.’ Henry sat up. ‘Is it frightening you? Was your dream a –’ He realised he didn’t know a word for nightmare. ‘Was it a bad dream?’

Atea took his hand. 'Why do you want us to wear your clothes?'

Henry frowned, amused. 'I don't want you to wear my clothes – you look very well in your pareo to me.' He put his hand on her hip, feeling the warmth of her through the cloth, the curve of flesh beneath. 'I like your clothes; they show your beauty. And tapa cloth feels good - soft.'

'But missionary dresses – like the one I wore to your ship. The Pastor wants women to wear them, and the popa'a give us cloth, and hats, and looking glasses to see how they are...and all those other things – shoes and stockings and necklaces.'

Henry leaned towards her and kissed her cheek. 'Pastor Coe wants women to be covered up, but I like you very well without a missionary dress, or a pareo –'

'There was a prophecy by a priest called Vaita, before any popa'a came. He said there would be an end to our customs. That you, popa'a, would possess our land. When it's cooler, I'm going to see Tehani.'

Atea looked preoccupied as she gazed across the lagoon. The French already had their land, Henry thought. It was just a matter of time before the rebels realised the hopelessness of their resistance. Why Tehani?

'Is there any special reason?'

'My dream. I have to give her something.'

Atea looked grim.

'Can I help you?'

'No. It is something I must do.'

She obviously didn't want to talk. Maybe he could distract her. 'It's so hot. Shall we go swimming?'

He got up and walked into the shallows, and Atea followed. He tried to catch her as she approached, but she slipped past, falling into the water, and swimming off under the surface. Henry waded out, enjoying the cool fizz of bubbles churning around his thighs. He threw himself forward and struck out.

No sooner had he made a dozen bold, delicious strokes than his hand hit rock and he found himself face to face with a large boulder, hidden just under the surface. Just in time, he pushed away from it, arcing his body upwards. He'd narrowly missed plunging headlong into it.

‘Ah hia – take care!’

Atea called out ahead of him, and Henry stood up to face her, his feet finding the sand beneath. She rose up out of the sea, the water circling her waist, sparkling all over; her eyes shining in the bright sun, rivulets running down her breasts and belly into the pale drape of her pareo. The huge sweep of blue sky behind her framed her like a Venus arising from the waves. As she shook her hair, a thousand droplets flew out around her, scattering into the sunlight on the water.

‘You swim too fast –’ She pointed to the dark shadows of coral boulders looming ahead under the water. ‘More rocks. Go slow.’

She grinned back at him. Her teeth were so even and white that any society beauty would envy her. How repellent Tahitian women must find the stained and gap toothed mouths of his sailors – and how very tolerant they must be. Henry waded towards her, pushed back her damp hair and kissed her. The cool of the sea was on her lips. Atea drew away as he tried to pull her closer.

She pressed her nose to his. ‘Swim gently – then you *feel* the coral before you hit it. You feel its shape coming.’

She slid out of his arms, making her way between the rocks. The pareo tied about her waist dipped under the surface as he set off after her. She swam underwater with extraordinary ease. Holding his breath, Henry pushed his head under and opened his eyes. The water murmured in his ears, cooling his face deliciously. Although his eyes stung, he could see rocks shouldering up at him, as clear as his own dappled hands. Atea's flashing legs looked paler in the blueness all around them. Henry's shirt rippled loosely about him, but the fish didn't seem startled by the two intruders swimming with them. Yet Atea was no intruder, he thought; she was as much at home in the sea as the fish. She'd grown up playing

in it, while he'd floated about on top of it for years, hardly ever venturing in. The pale soles of her feet undulated ahead of him as she swam through the maze of coral.

Their shadows skimmed over the sand beneath. All around them the turquoise water was saturated with calm. The colour enveloped Henry in uncanny quiet as he manoeuvred through the water, following Atea around the lumps of scattered boulders. Her long hair trailed out like weed. He turned his head upwards to take a long gulp of air, then swam into the blue, letting it cool him, letting it sink into his limbs, wash his eyes, his mouth, cleansing him all over. Intense light shone through the water, illuminating the details of quick fish, yellow shells on the sand below, and the dark bulk of the rocks looming up and disappearing behind. The blueness seeped into him, settling his mind, calming his spirit.

Silence held them suspended. All he saw was soundless, elegant, unhurried. Even the speed of the fish as they darted away didn't seem agitated so much as part of a smooth dance, with its own harmonious rhythms, eddies and flows. As he swam, he felt admiration for the woman swimming ahead of him. There might be violence and horror around them, but she was courageous, capable. Somehow, Atea had let him into her world.

Chapter 18

Tehani and Johnson came to visit when the afternoon began to cool. The men strolled off together along the beach while Atea and Tehani rested in the shade, watching palm leaves wave high above them.

‘Miri told me you were looking after him... I didn’t think you were only cleaning the house and bringing him food.’ Tehani’s eyes sparkled behind the leaf she was using as a fan.

‘Mmm.’

‘So – what is he like?’

Atea answered slowly, teasing a little. ‘He... smells different. He cleans himself with fat from animals, rolled into a lump, scented with flowers –’

‘Soap. So does Edward. It smells good, doesn’t it? I like watching him shave, pulling his face about to scrape it with that blade – he looks so funny –’ Tehani giggled, and waited.

Instead, she watched the palm leaves lift and droop. They were so pretty. Frigate birds cried out over the sea beyond the reef. The sacred birds of sea and land will come to mourn, she thought.

‘Does he talk Tahitian to you?’

‘He’s good – most things he can say. He learned on his journey here, he says, so he was ready.’ Atea smiled. ‘Sometimes he has to ask what I mean, but we don’t always talk. It’s sad to be with him, a popa’a, although he’s good to me.’

Tehani laughed, brushing her with her palm leaf, tickling her shoulder. ‘What is he like?’

‘Sweet; shy and sweet...’

Tehani propped herself up on her elbow to gaze at Atea, impatient. ‘And?’

But Atea didn't want to make a joke of him. 'He's sad. Maybe our two sadnesses sit well together. His sister died – his twin. He talks about her, and another woman.'

'Another woman – his woman?'

'More difficult than that. She went away from him.'

'To another island?'

'I don't know.' She didn't want to tell how he had looked for her – it was Henry's story to tell.

'But did he love her?' Tehani stopped fanning. 'Does he still love her?'

'I don't know. Maybe.'

'You haven't found out much!'

'He's been here one night,' Atea smiled. 'We've been busy...'

Tehani laughed. 'Haven't you got anything to tell me?'

'I dreamt of ships. Many, many ships that are coming across the seas. Too many. All full of popa'a. It made me think of the prophecy.' Atea paused. Tehani knew about the prophecy, everyone knew. 'About the popa'a boats with no outrigger. Has Johnson talked about more ships?'

Tehani shrugged. 'He says there are more than I can think of, from his island and from lots of other places. More than when lots of canoes come from other islands. More than spears in the spear throwing contests.'

'All today I've been thinking of going to the camp in the mountains.'

'Why?' Tehani looked afraid. 'There's no need to do that.'

'It was such a strong dream.' Atea sighed. 'When I went to the ship for tapitane Henry to make my picture, he had many pictures of ships.' She looked at Tehani. '*Many* pictures, and each one different – different hulls, different masts, different flags. I don't know if the warriors know this. All the pictures show it is true, that there are so many coming, and I think tapitane Henry spoke the truth. Maybe my dream was telling me I must go.'

‘No! They won’t want to hear this from you, Atea – don’t go! What will it mean anyway – what will they do that is different? They’re already fighting.’

‘Has Johnson talked about the fighting?’

‘He says it is hopeless for the men up there. He says it will be better if the English live in the Governor house not the French, the English are our friends. And he is good to me...’

‘Why is it hopeless?’

Tehani shrugged. ‘Because they are so many? English and French?’

‘Do the warriors know this?’

‘I don’t know,’ Tehani scratched her palm frond in the sand. ‘I haven’t been up there. Only the men go up there, you know that.’

‘I used to dream of leaving Temana, of sailing away to be with Hauata, but I didn’t. Maybe it is wrong to ignore such dreams. If Puatea was alive, she could tell me.’ Atea rubbed her face, still unsure. ‘I don’t know. If I talk about the prophecy, maybe they’ll be kind and listen.’

‘Kind? Arenui and his men? They’re warriors – they won’t want to be told by you! It’s dangerous to go up there and talk like that to them.’

‘Look at me. My beauty is ruined. My Temana is dead, my daughter is gone. But I can go up there and try –’

‘Arenui is dangerous! He won’t listen to you. If he’s angry he’ll hurt you, and there are so many of them -’

Atea gazed along the beach. ‘They’re coming back.’ She put her hand on Tehani’s. ‘Don’t tell Henry. Or Johnson. Let’s talk about something else - something that’s happening in Pape’ete.’

Tehani groaned. Atea hoped she wouldn’t talk about it with Johnson later. But as the men approached, she spoke.

‘Pastor Coe came to see us last night. Well, to see Edward.’

Atea smiled gratefully, relaxing onto her elbows. ‘Why?’

‘Mrs Coe is in labour, and the Pastor was worried. He came to see if Johnson could help – if he had any medicine...’

‘Did he?’

‘No, but he went there, to see her.’ Tehani shrugged. ‘Then he came back.’

‘Ia orana.’ Johnson flopped down in the shade beside them, smiling while Henry went to the hut to get water.

‘Tehani says Mrs Coe is having another baby – have you heard any more this morning?’

Johnson took off his hat and wiped his face with a handkerchief. ‘She’s been at it for quite a while now. It seemed to be going very slowly. Not a lot of fight in her, poor woman. There wasn’t much I could do. I don’t even have any laudanum. But she may manage it yet...’

Atea frowned into the sun. He didn’t seem to care very much. ‘How long since her water came out?’

‘The Pastor said she started yesterday evening. About six – at sunset. He was very worried this morning, so he came to get me. I was sorry I couldn’t do any more – but I’m not a midwife.’

‘What’s this?’ Henry was carrying the water gourd and some coco shell cups. He put them down in the sand then dropped down beside Johnson. ‘Who started what?’

Atea smiled at him. ‘Mrs Coe. Birthing. But she started a while ago. Do you know why she’s taking so long, Johnson?’

‘Thanks.’ Johnson reached out for a cup of water and drank it in one long swallow. ‘Sometimes it takes a while, doesn’t it? She’s had long labours before, the Pastor said. But she’s not young any more - it seemed a little like she’s given up to me. Hard place for a white woman, this. Very hard.’

Atea wondered why it was hard for a white woman – was she lonely for other white women? Maybe they knew how to help her have her baby. ‘How is the baby lying? Is it moving?’ She wondered if she could help, even though Mrs Coe was always busy with her

own wants, too busy to talk with her or any of the other women, except to tell them what to do. 'Where is she?'

'She's at their house.' Johnson dribbled a few drops of water from his cup onto Tehani's leg, smiling. 'Well, I don't think she was going to go anywhere.'

Henry looked embarrassed as he watched Johnson tease Tehani. It was sweet he was so shy.

Tehani giggled. 'You don't even like her, Atea. No one likes her.'

Johnson rubbed the water slowly along Tehani's shin. 'She may yet do it - she should know what she's doing by now. Sometimes things can start to move along. Anyway, she didn't want me there no matter what the Pastor said, that was clear. She did have her eldest daughter with her. How many babies has she had now - is it six?'

'Maybe seven. The last two died.' Although Atea didn't like her, she did feel sorry for her. She pictured Mrs Coe's thin arms, red and patchy with bites, wrapped around her grey little babies. She imagined lying with the Pastor at night, repelled by the thought of touching the thin strands of his sad hair. 'Isn't Mrs Miller helping her?'

'They're not friends any more,' Tehani said. 'Mrs Coe has said too many bad things to her. Mrs Miller told Aunt Amura.'

'It's kind of you to be worried for her,' said Henry.

'Maybe I can go -' Atea felt unsure if the Pastor would even let her in his house, but it was her work to help women have their babies. And Mrs Coe was still a woman, even if she said bad things.

'Wait awhile,' said Tehani. 'You know she won't welcome you - and maybe she'll be all right anyway. You don't have to look after her. She was always mean to us - no-one expects you to help her.'

That was true. Mrs Coe didn't want her help. She didn't like any islanders touching her, and she'd never liked Atea, even when she was little, even before Temana died.

'Stay and watch the sun set with us - I've got some stronger drink in the hut.' Henry sat up, ready to go and get his bottles.

Johnson smiled. 'I'd like to, but we have to obey the curfew, even out here. We don't want to walk back in dark and be mistaken for warriors.' He grinned and got up, holding out his hand to Tehani.

'Wait.' Atea rolled onto her side and got up. 'I have something for Tehani. Stay there.'

She went to Vane's hut and stood in the gloom, thinking. Tehani was worried for her, but most of her people would understand that she had to tell the dream. Maybe the chiefs wouldn't listen, but she had to tell. Slowly, she bent and picked up her precious shells, then Temana's fishing hooks that she'd hung up on the wall. Hauata could have something made by her father's hands. Kneeling down, she scabbled in a folded cloth for her shark's tooth, and her birthing knife, a pale curve of sharpened shell. What else? As she looked around, she ran her finger along the edge of her knife. Maybe Hauata could use it one day. Then she saw her favourite pareo, the one with a fern pattern along the edge. Carefully, she laid it out and rolled everything up in it, then tied it together. All her most precious things, for her daughter. She didn't want Tehani to open it in front of the men.

Tehani and Johnson were standing, ready to go. Johnson and Henry were saying something together in English while Tehani brushed the dark sand off her pareo. Atea went to Tehani's side and leaned close.

'Things for Hauata – ' She breathed quietly into Tehani's ear. 'If I'm not here when she comes back...' She took Tehani's hand and slid the tied-up cloth over her wrist, looking into her eyes.

Tehani frowned, glancing down at the bundle. 'Don't,' she muttered. 'Please.' She tried to push it back to Atea. 'What can I say to her if you don't come back?'

'Tell her I'm sorry.' Atea held the bundle firmly on Tehani's wrist. 'Tell her about my dream.'

Chapter 19

While they were strolling on the beach the next morning, Heremanu paddled by in his canoe, lifting his paddle in greeting as Atea waved.

‘Ia orana,’ she called. ‘Fishing?’

‘Near Papara,’ Heremanu replied. ‘Ia orana, tapitane!’ He waved at Henry.

Henry waved back and called out greetings. Atea waded towards Heremanu.

‘Mrs Coe – has her baby come?’

Heremanu stuck his paddle deeper into the water, slowing and turning his canoe.

‘No, Aiata said she is still trying. No baby.’ He nodded his head and paddled on. The surface of the lagoon was smooth, a few clouds sailing in the water.

‘Do you know what is wrong?’ She called after him.

He called back over his shoulder. ‘Mother tired, baby tired, Aiata said.’

Atea stood and watched the flat water behind his canoe spread out. This was not the news she hoped for. Was Mrs Coe dying? Again she’d dreamt of the ships, and she felt the dream pulling at her, but still she wasn’t sure what she could say to Arenui and the others – she had no good way for stopping all the popa’a ships. As Heremanu’s paddle got quieter, dipping and pushing, she pictured Mrs Coe’s pointed face getting whiter and whiter. She would get weaker, and she didn’t have much mana anyway.

Was it a sign – that she must go to Mrs Coe, and not to the camp? Wading out of the lagoon, Atea thought about the camp – if she dreamed again one more night then she’d know Ta’aroa was telling her to go. And those ships were very far away. Mrs Coe was in Pape’ete – someone she could help. She couldn’t just forget about her without even trying to help. Pape’ete wasn’t far; she could get there quickly. Atea walked back towards Henry, her wet pareo sticking to her legs.

‘He says Mrs Coe is not born. Maybe I can help.’

Henry looked surprised.

‘I will go to her.’

‘That’s kind of you.’ He waited for her, holding out his hand as she got close. She knew he wanted her to be with him, but he wouldn’t say it. ‘Have you been at any of her births before?’

‘No, she never asked for me. But she hasn’t had such trouble before...’ They walked back along the beach, Atea’s hand in his. ‘You heard what Johnson said, he can’t help, and there is no-one else. Mrs Miller doesn’t know anything, even if she tries to help. Someone told me she used to boil water when Mrs Coe was birthing – I don’t know why.’

‘Maybe to wash the baby? And her?’

‘Boiling water would burn it.’

Henry shook his head like he didn’t want to think about it. ‘Anyway, it’s good of you to go and help. I’ll do some fishing while you’re there – see what I can catch.’

When Atea arrived at the Pastor’s house, the Pastor was sitting outside in the shade. He looked sad and crumpled, his sleeves pushed up and no hat.

‘Ia orana, Pastor Coe.’

He squinted up into the sun as if he didn’t recognise her.

‘I’m afraid it is not a good day.’

She could forgive him his rudeness for not greeting her – he looked so sad and tired.

‘How is your wife?’

‘I’m praying she doesn’t die, but she’s losing what strength she had.’

A low moan came out of the windows where a flowered cloth hung so no-one could see in or out. Why didn’t they like to see the sky?

‘Pastor, I am midwife for my people – maybe I can help her.’

The Pastor’s hands were tight together. He probably knew that his wife didn’t lie her, she thought. ‘Johnson’s already been. He says there’s nothing to be done.’

Atea nodded. ‘He’s not a midwife.’

The Pastor frowned up at her, sighing heavily. He didn't reply. He looked smaller than usual, as if his mana was disappearing.

'I have helped many women having babies. All over the island. I have done it for many years since my grandmother Puatea died. She taught me many ways to help. I have gone to Tahiti Iti too if I am asked.'

'She won't be happy to be seen like this.'

To be seen? Atea couldn't remember being worried about being seen – but Tahitians went into the forest. 'I have seen many women having babies.' It was true, but it didn't make her feel sure about Mrs Coe. Was that the right answer?

It was a long while before the pastor answered. Atea stood silently waiting. He pressed his hands together as if making a prayer.

He sighed again. 'All right. I'll speak to her. But I don't think she'll like it.'

Slowly, he got up and pushed open the door. Atea walked a little distance away so that she couldn't hear them talk, standing in the shade of a palm.

There was the rumble of the pastor's voice and barely a sound in answer. Atea sat down in the shade to wait, plaiting a few palm fronds together as if she didn't mind being shut out and waiting. A skinny girl pulled the flowery cloth aside and looked out of the window at her. There was a lot of rumbling before he came out and called to her.

'I've told her you will try to help. She's not happy, but – she's in a lot of pain. My daughter Verity is with her.'

He turned and gestured towards the door. The Coes did not use 'thank you' very much, not to islanders anyway. Atea got up and brushed her hands down her skirt. She'd put on her missionary dress to please Mrs Coe, even though it would make her work more difficult.

The room was gloomy. A stale smell was strong in there, the salty scent of the waters, but stronger than usual, and the bodies of the children, who were curled up in the chairs. An old smell, as if nothing had been swept out for a long while. The children watched her walk in but they didn't speak, just raised their sad thin faces to look at her. Mrs

Coe was in a room at the back, lying on a big bed on legs. It was all wrong for welcoming a baby – too gloomy to see easily, no sparkle of leaves to watch, no trees to lean on. No husband to hold her. Why did the Pastor sit uselessly outside? Mrs Coe roosted on the bed like a bird, her nose pointing like a beak. Atea ignored the smell and made her face soft as she went in. The daughter held onto the metal of the bed as if it would steady her. She only just had breasts herself; she looked terrified, her mouth a small line under huge eyes. Verity.

‘Ia orana, Mrs Coe. I have come to see if I can help you and the baby.’

Mrs Coe’s hand flapped weakly in a gesture Atea knew well – go away. Her knees were up, under a cover, and her face was a pale smudge.

‘There is no-one else to help you. The Pastor said to try. I’m sorry if you don’t like it.’ Atea felt her own body standing awkwardly in the room, already sharp with difficulty in the way the girl stood terrified, the mother a broken gull, staring.

The girl was watching her, her eyes wide. ‘*She can’t talk.*’

Atea stood still beside the bed, her eyes fixed on Mrs Coe’s. The daughter could get a cup of water for her even if she didn’t welcome her with words – did none of them have any manners, Atea thought. As her eyes got used to the dim light, she could see blue veins showing through the pale skin at Mrs Coe’s temples. The dream ships that morning had looked like coconuts as they floated far away. When they washed up on the beach they were huge, the men had cracked them open, and inside there were many worms wriggling in the stinking coco meat, the insides of their bodies moving inside their thin skins. Perhaps she should have gone to warn the men, instead of being here where she wasn’t wanted.

Mrs Coe moaned as a pain gathered. Atea stretched out her hand to place it on her arching belly, but Mrs Coe tried to knock her arm away.

‘*Don’t – touch – me!*’ Her voice croaked into the room like a crow’s.

Verity’s hands flew to her own mouth, her eyes wide.

Everything in the room was wrong, but she had to pick what she could do, and what she couldn’t change. Mrs Coe lying down as if she was ill – maybe she could get her up. She knew without asking that they wouldn’t open the door or the windows – popa’a women were

very shy. So why didn't they go into the forest where they could be private? She couldn't send the other children away, but Verity could help. The Pastor would be stronger, but he wouldn't come in. Could she look to see if the baby's head was showing? Were popa'a women the same? She felt suddenly unsure. Could she do this? Reluctant to touch the bedcover, or Mrs Coe, , she turned to the girl.

'Have you looked?'

Verity looked terrified.

'At your mother? To see if the baby is coming out?'

Verity's face got very red, and she spoke in a small voice 'No.'

Atea leaned over Mrs Coe. What did they do, just wait for it to fall out? Maybe they were made differently, these popa'a women. Maybe their babies didn't come out the same way. The girl knew nothing, and suddenly Atea didn't want to look, if they were so shamed by it.

'You're tired. We need to do something before you are too tired to push any more.' She spoke softly and slowly, looking in Mrs Coe's eyes, knowing what it's like to be pushing and not able to talk. 'I need to touch you, to help. I can feel where the baby is, if you let me.'

Again, she reached out her hand.

Again, Mrs Coe tried to knock it away. '*Wash*,' she hissed. Her eyes stayed hard, unwelcoming.

Atea took a deep breath. Women can get angry when they are birthing. They can't find all the words, everything is squashed down into breath and push and trying. And Mrs Coe was always bad tempered. She looked at Verity.

'Can you get water?'

Verity busied with a black pot, and brought a cup of water without a word. She understood Tahitian well enough – often the children were better than their parents. Atea took a sip – it was warm. Then she gave it back to Verity and held out her hands, cupped to receive. As the girl poured, Atea rubbed her hands together under the trickle of water,

remembering Mrs Coe scolding her husband long ago “black hands have touched that” when he put a piece of noni fruit to his lips. Her hands would be dirty to Mrs Coe no matter how much she washed them.

Atea held up her clean hands to Mrs Coe. She steadied herself as she put out her hands and laid them on the taut belly hidden by a big pale cloth that covered the bed. The cloth was patched with damp where it touched Mrs Coe. Through the thin cloth, she could feel that the baby was head down, waiting to come out. Why didn’t Mrs Coe help it?

‘You must move,’ she said. ‘To help the baby move.’

Mrs Coe moaned, shaking her head. Atea could feel the wave of pushing tightening her belly, then slowly drawing back.

‘You have to get off the bed. Can you move your legs over?’ She tried to smile at the exhausted woman, to encourage her, but Mrs Coe’s body drew away, her mouth pressed together, a thin line. She shook her head.

Atea looked at Verity. She was holding a corner of the big cloth, looking at it as if she was interested in it.

‘Verity. Look at me.’ The girl looked up, dropping the cloth as if she’d done something wrong. ‘I am a midwife – do you understand? I have helped mothers to have their baby many times.’ Verity’s eyes showed that she understood. ‘Your mother must move off the bed to help move the baby’s head out.’ She tried to sound sure even though she didn’t know if it was the same for these women. ‘Tell her in English.’ She motioned to the girl. ‘Go closer and tell her.’

As if her mother was dangerous, Verity moved cautiously up the side of the bed. She spoke in a pleading way, English words clucking out of her mouth like rattling pebbles. Atea was glad to see Mrs Coe take her daughter’s hand.

‘Tell her “No”. Tell her to get out. I will *not* be humiliated –’

Atea didn’t need to understand all the words to hear the refusal in them. She looked at the mother gripping her daughter’s hand, and Verity’s distress as she turned to say the no as if Atea was stupid.

Atea took a step back from the bedside. She looked down at her missionary dress, smoothing it with her damp hands. She didn't have to stay. If Mrs Coe didn't want her there, then maybe she could be no help. She sighed and looked towards the door. It would be a relief to walk into the sunlight, to breathe clean air.

'I'll go.'

She was sad to say it, but she couldn't force her help on a stubborn woman. Slowly, she backed towards the doorway until she was leaning on the door, pushing it open. Fresher air leaked through the gap. If she left now, they couldn't be angry that she came, but left when Mrs Coe didn't want her there. One of the children in the other room raised his head to look at her.

'Wait!' Verity cried out, as she looked from her mother to Atea. She came across the room, holding out her hands. 'Don't go. Please, I don't know what to do. Don't leave us - I'll help you - please?'

A tear trembled on her eyelashes, then dropped onto her cheek. Her seriousness reminded Atea of Hauata, when she was begging her not to stay with Temana. Verity cared about her mother, just the same as Hauata did.

'Please?'

'I don't know. I can't help if she won't do as I ask.' Atea shrugged. 'She has to get down off there.'

Turning back to her mother, Verity rattled a lot more words out. They fell all over her mother's chest until she lay back, closing her eyes. 'All right. All right.'

Verity looked at Atea. 'She agrees.'

Atea rubbed her face. Puatea, who taught her how to be midwife, always said you help whoever asks, even if you're tired, even if you don't like them, even if they have done bad things. Reluctantly Atea left the crack of fresh air and returned to the bedside. So, they would try. She breathed four big 'ha' breaths over Mrs Coe's belly, then she spoke. 'Now, before the next wave.' She pointed at the daughter. 'You help. Push her onto her side.' She grasped Mrs Coe's knees and pulled them towards her with one arm, showing Verity where

to push Mrs Coe's back with the other hand. The girl squeaked as her mother moved. Mrs Coe's skinny arm flapped as they got her over on her side. It was like holding a seabird, thin, awkward bones under her hands, struggling.

'No – no –'

'Mrs Coe, you've got to sit up.' Atea had to get her onto the ground, but how? The bed was too high, they couldn't just roll her out, she might be hurt. Atea wished she could look to see if the baby was pushing out yet, but didn't want to upset Mrs Coe. 'Come round here,' she gestured to the daughter, who was holding on to the end of the bed by her mother's head as if it was her beloved friend.

'No – no – no,' gasped Mrs Coe.

'Yes, mother,' Verity spoke to her mother's ear. 'You must.'

Atea met Verity's earnest gaze. 'Good. We're going to help you sit up now, so you can get down on the ground, to move about. You need to crawl.' She took Verity's hands off the metal, and put them on Mrs Coe's arm ready to lift her. She slid her own hands under the other arm.

'Now. Lift her up.'

Together they got the gasping woman sitting up, edging her towards the side of the bed. She moaned, leaning away from Atea, towards her daughter. Her feet were on the ground, Atea was glad to see. 'Now down.' Together they shifted her forward off the bed, but she went down too fast onto her hands and knees, too suddenly for them to stop her.

Mrs Coe cried out. '*You savages you.*'

Verity cried out.

Not all women were brave, Atea told herself. Mrs Coe growled at the floor through her teeth. If she lived, her knees would be bruised, but she might yet live.

'Tell her to crawl.'

Verity told her, but Mrs Coe didn't crawl; she growled at the floor some more. Then another wave of pushing came, and they waited while she growled and panted. Verity looked at Atea, big-eyed.

'Don't let her die.' Verity whispered so quietly the words were like the curtain moving in the breeze. *'I've seen the head,'* she added.

'When?' At last the girl was talking. Why didn't she say so before? *'Was it long ago?'* She tried to sound soft, not to frighten her.

'Quite a while ago –'

'Thank you for telling me.' Atea touched her wrist, but the girl recoiled.

So the baby was stuck. It would die if it stayed stuck too long. They would both die if she didn't push it out.

Atea glanced at Mrs Coe – she was too wrapped in the strength of the wave to hear as Atea spoke quietly to Verity. *'We must make her move. When this wave stops, we help her crawl. Move her legs and arms like me.'*

After letting her rest a moment as the wave drew back, Atea got hold of Mrs Coe's arm and dragged it forward, then her leg on the same side. She pointed at Verity, *'go on the other side and do that – now,'* and spoke to Mrs Coe, close to her face. *'You must crawl. Help your baby to come out.'* Atea knew she understood some Tahitian, even if she didn't like to speak it.

Mrs Coe's eyelids came down over her sliding eyes. She slumped forwards, her head on her hands. If Mrs Coe died, maybe the Pastor would blame her. All of the popa'a might blame her, and call her bad. Maybe they would kill her this time. The blue vein in Mrs Coe's temple bulged like the worm skins. Her hair was the colour of the rats that came off the ships. Atea felt impatient – she could see Mrs Coe was tired, but didn't she want to help herself, her baby? Women needed to gather their courage for birthing - this woman had done it many times before. Perhaps she was tired of her life of being cross, telling people what to do and not to do, and fidgeting after the Pastor. She took a deep breath.

'Come, Mrs Coe, please try.'

Mrs Coe stayed slumped on the floor, slowly rolling her head from side to side on her hands.

'I do know it is hard work, I have done it myself.'

She waited. Perhaps she should give up too. Why should she help another popa's baby to be born? Mrs Coe breathed onto the ground, her bottom in the air. Even after all those babies, she didn't know what to do?

'Please?' There were Verity's big eyes. The Pastor waiting. Those children curled up outside. Atea remembered something Mrs Coe used to say so often, and she decided to risk saying it out loud.

'Are you afraid of a little hard work?'

She might have smiled as she said it, if she wasn't so worried. She felt as naughty as when Mrs Coe used to scold her as a child. Verity's mouth was a silent circle of horror.

Mrs Coe's eyelid fluttered. Her back jerked. Was she angry? Slowly, she slid one hand forward. Had it worked? Then her knee. Verity clasped her hands.

'Good! That's it. Get to the end of the bed...'

Another wave began when she got to the end of the bed. At last it began to feel as if she was willing, or at least trying. Mrs Coe panted on all fours, straining until the wave drew back into the tide, then she put her forehead down on the rug, made of plaited cloth. The flowers of dresses were in the plaiting. Maybe she sat like Atea did, making mats with her daughter.

'Crawl again.'

'She's so tired –' Verity whispered. 'Can't you let her rest?'

'It's not the best way.' Atea looked in Verity's eyes, dark with tears. 'Moving is better.'

Verity held onto the bed again, muttering *Ah father in heaven* prayers, while Atea squatted beside her mother and moved arm, then leg, arm, then leg.

'Come and help.'

Verity obeyed, copying Atea on the other side of her mother as she moved along the bedside and turned to crawl back. Together the three of them moved around the bed, and together they breathed through the waves – at last it began to feel more like a birth, a powerful tide holding them in the rhythm of pushing and moving and pushing. Mrs Coe

crawled along the other side of the bed, then turned around to go back. It looked as if she didn't want to leave the safety of the bed, and she made sounds of complaint, but she did it. Atea looked in Mrs Coe's desperate eyes, and was surprised to receive a nod of recognition. She could feel Mrs Coe depending on her now. In her need, she seemed to have dropped her dislike. Another wave, and in a surprising rush of strength Mrs Coe grabbed the bed frame and pulled herself up, straining. It was frightening how red these people could be. Mrs Coe was creaking as if she was a branch that would break. Verity said *our father* faster and faster. Atea stroked down the straining woman's sides, feeling how low the baby was, daring to put her hand underneath –

‘It's coming now!’

Atea moved behind her, ready to catch the baby, kneeling low.

‘Hold her, not the bed,’ she said to Verity. ‘Under her shoulders. Help her. Hold her up.’

The girl got hold of her mother and Atea leaned forward to speak into Mrs Coe's ear.

‘Don't push hard, push softly for this one.’

Mrs Coe put her chin down and creaked again. The baby slithered out, and Atea caught it while Verity cried *oh, oh, oh*.

It was a boy, very red but breathing, with the same square chin as the Pastor. His milky blue eyes opened and closed. He seemed happy to be out, his little arms waving and his legs curling up. All of them were smiling, gazing at him. Verity knelt down beside her mother and Atea. There was peace in the room.

Mrs Coe looked and smiled. *Oh Thank God. Thank God.* Atea had never seen her smile so much, and she couldn't help beaming back at her. She held the baby, slippery and wriggling, and Mrs Coe reached round to touch, brushing Atea's hands as she held the baby, as if to say thank you. Already Atea was wondering if Mrs Coe would stay on her knees to deliver the afterbirth, or would they have to get her up on the bed again. First they needed to cut the cord and put the baby somewhere safe.

Atea turned to Verity, smiling too, relieved and happy he was alive. 'Can you get me a knife?' Her own birthing knife was in the bundle for Hauata.

Suddenly Mrs Coe was struggling round on her knees, trying to grab the baby. *Oh no oh no you won't!* She gasped. She caught hold of his arm, pulling him towards her. *Savage! You savage!* The baby's red mouth opened in a shuddering wail as his mother grabbed at him.

Shocked, Atea pushed the baby into its mother's arms and got to her feet, backing away. 'For the cord – for the cord!'

'Get out!' Mrs Coe screeched, 'Get her away from me!'

Chapter 20

It was early afternoon when Atea got back to Vane's hut, and Henry woke from his doze as she drank from the gourd. He'd been worried for Mrs Coe, and for Atea – it might not go well for her if either mother or baby died. He wasn't surprised to see she looked exhausted.

'Come to me.' He patted the sleeping mat beside him. Atea lay down, curling herself against him. 'So, does Mrs Coe live?'

'Yes,' Atea replied, 'and the baby.'

'Ah, that's good,' Henry stroked her hair. 'Was it difficult?' He didn't really want to know details, but he felt he should ask.

'She was difficult.'

'I can imagine it wasn't easy. I always feel glad I'm not Pastor Coe. I hope she was grateful for your help?'

Atea sighed. 'She said *savages savages get away from me.*'

'Ah.'

'She didn't want me helping. I don't understand why she's so far away from her own body, crying as if it's doing something bad to her, but she wasn't just feeling, doing what she needed to do. She didn't want me there, but after a while she let me help. I don't understand. Why doesn't her husband help, or Mrs Miller, or the Governor's wife?'

'I don't think she's very fond of –'

'And all the children waiting in the room beside where she is, pulling on her, unhappy to hear her crying out, and the only one with her, her daughter, was useless and scared. Why don't they make it happier? When a woman takes her baby home from the forest here, there is a special birth house for her and the baby, all fresh and new, where they can stay and be peaceful together. A clean place, that smells good, and people bring food... '

Obviously, she was upset. It was clear she took her work very seriously. He wasn't sure what she meant about Mrs Coe being far away from her body. She'd talked to him quite

a bit about how he could just let his body feel, and it was what he tried to do while she was not there, allowing the lethargy or the misery to wash through him, without resisting. It was good to have a private place to do that. He could imagine how hard it might be for Mrs Coe though, with all those others waiting outside. He remembered hiding with Eliza when their mother gave birth to Prudence, desperate to get away from the horrible, animal wails.

‘You were brave to go and help. I’m proud of you.’

She stretched out beside him, relaxing a little. ‘*A Hia*. Maybe the baby was grateful,’ she murmured.

‘I’m glad you’re back; I missed you.’

It was hard to believe; he’d only been with her for two days yet he’d missed her almost as soon as she was gone. Roberts had come over in the launch to see how he was, but he didn’t stay long, he reported that the men were a little restive at their captain’s absence, and left. The men could be restive; he wasn’t far away, and he needed to rest. Atea yawned. Her breath smelt of coconut. A week ago he would never have imagined it possible he would be lying on the ground in a thatched hut with a naked woman.

‘Now we have all evening, and all night to relax. I’m not far away from your body...’ He cupped his hand around her smooth shoulder.

Atea smiled. ‘Are you going to make me happier, tapitane Henry?’

‘I can try,’ Henry smiled back.

‘Let me rest a while before you do.’ She kissed his shoulder. ‘I’m so tired. Tell me some more about your island. Tell me about the women there...’

*

Atea woke at dawn. Ta’aroa had sent ships into her dreams again, and she couldn’t go back to sleep. With dread, she realised that she had to go up to the camp. Trying not to disturb

Henry, she crept out of the hut and went to fish in Vane's canoe, but all she caught were a few parrotfish. She wanted to take as many fish as she could, but Vane's hooks felt awkward in her fingers, and it was chilly out on the water, wondering what she could say to the chiefs, scared to go up there and face them. But it seemed her dreams wouldn't let her rest until she did something. Without waking Henry, she slipped back into the hut to get a small net to carry the fish – if she didn't come back there would be no-one to miss it.

Her hands were cold as she looked at Henry sleeping – it would be good to lie down with him again, to warm herself, smooth back his hair, rest in the safety of his closeness. But if she woke him to say goodbye, he might try to stop her, or ask where she was going. If she didn't return he wouldn't have to wonder for long; Tehani would tell him. It was too sad to linger. A curl of coco flesh was lying in its shell near Henry's hand. Last night she'd told him she was going visiting relatives; that was enough for him to know. It was true many of the men up at Faoutaoua were relatives; many of them she'd known all her life. Tenderly, she kissed his hand, picked up the coco meat, and crept out of the hut. He didn't stir.

As she walked towards the forest she chewed the coco flesh, hoping it would calm her uneasy belly. When she reached the trees she paused to gaze at the sea, asking Hina of the Without for her protection, saying goodbye to the sparkling waters that refreshed and fed her every day. The lagoon was so inviting; how easily she could turn back, sink into the waves, feed the rays, float in the soothing blue. Full of sadness, she turned to the shadows of the forest. She had to try.

Direction was easy – up and up towards the camp at Faoutaoua. She was afraid, but she made her feet walk. Chiefs could be harsh. He was a fearsome warrior. She couldn't help thinking of stories of Arenui's cruelty – some called it clarity. But there were all those ships, and she was afraid. Already she was lucky to be alive; the Governor didn't say kill her, he said mark her, and she'd died to herself when she'd killed Temana – who was she now? A murderer, a murderer. So she could risk herself, footstep after footstep. Although she was willing to die, as her feet walked up and up she knew the fear. But she was not more precious than all those men in the camp up there. Between the trees, up and up, she was

walking to them, for them. Without stopping, she went through trees and ferns and many mosquitoes, looking up as she walked to the green light coming through the leaves above, listening to the quiet breath of the forest, the chirrup of crickets calling encouragement. Even the mosquitoes reminded her of the warm blood filling her body, the juiciness of being alive. When she reached the cascade she rested and drank, cooling her feet in the pool, remembering meeting Henry there with Johnson. Then she was shy and she felt maimed by the tattoo on her face, but Henry had made her feel beautiful and desirable again. She slid the net of fish into the cold mountain water, then waded further in to splash herself. She could go back so easily, see what Henry was doing, lie down in the shade with him, absorb herself in loving. She longed for his soothing touch, his easy talk. She didn't want to be brave any more. Lying back in the water, listening to the cascade roaring down the rocks, she floated between going on and going back. Hauata would have no mother or father if she didn't come back.

When she got out, chilled and still unsure, a cricket leapt onto her pareo as she folded it around her waist. Gazing at her as if it was a pouara, it clung on at her hip with its hooked hands, its eyes fixed on hers. 'I'm sorry, please forgive me.' She said the words slowly, feeling them in her chest. Was it one of her own pouara? It wiggled its feelers at her. 'Thank you. I love you.' Then it sprang away. She watched where it went. It sat on the path that went up, waiting. She stepped towards it, and it sprang further along the path – up and up. Go and try.

Sighing, she pulled the net of fish out of the pool and set off again. At least if Arenui killed her in anger it would be quick, his war club smack to her head. Would Henry mourn her like he mourned his sister and Grace? She didn't know, and she didn't know what was best any more. There was no best with all the ships coming. All those ships, swarming across the sea pushed her on, up and up.

She prayed to Hina of the Within as she walked on, her ears telling her she was getting higher. The fish in the net grew heavier. Arenui didn't like anyone to tell him what to do. She must remember to be careful and humble. But many of the chiefs were up there, the

ones who didn't agree with Pomare, and they would talk together, probably after she'd left. They knew more than she did about fighting. As she neared the camp, she felt the watching through the trees. Two tall warriors appeared, one to each side of her. Making her voice strong, she called out greetings, and they came closer, spears shining as they flicked into the light.

'I've come to see the chiefs, to talk with them.'

Neither of them smiled in greeting. Their eyes were on the fish in the net hanging from her hand. Flies buzzed. Atea held up the net towards them.

'Why should they see you?' The one with stripes like the sunrise on his forehead lowered his spear at her.

'Tell Moana I am Atea and I want to tell him my dream.'

They didn't answer, but talked to each other. She could tell they didn't like to look at her face, at the ugly marks. One came to stand behind her, the other in front. They didn't take her net. Her heart was strong and loud in her chest.

'Go on,' he said. 'Walk.'

The two men walked in silence. They came around a big rock, and the camp was there. She stopped to catch her breath, shocked to see so many huts, stretching away into the trees. So many. A whole village, more than at Pape'ete. Men were sitting outside their huts in small knots, the low sound of voices rising up. Some she recognised, from Pape'ete, from further around the coast, even from Tahiti-Iti. She knew men came and went, but the camp looked very settled, as if they could stay here for many more seasons. Fires were smoking, and the smell of cooking breadfruit, woodsmoke and men drifted towards her. Over at the other side of the spread out huts she could see a line of men carrying water gourds with shoulder yokes, and others practising throwing spears on a cleared patch of ground. The nearest faces turned towards her, but no-one got up to greet her. Their faces asked why was she there? The man behind her prodded her in the back. Embarrassed, she walked on, dangling the sorry net. So many men watching her. So many to feed. Her few fish were an insult.

They put her in a large empty hut. As she sat alone, she could hear men murmuring and shouting and grunting in the camp around her, she could smell their sweat and their smoke. They were waiting too, like the fruit of the breadfruit tree waiting to be pulled down. But breadfruit don't mind being picked. Flies buzzed around the fish. She waited with dread, sitting with a straight back.

After a long while, Moana came, but alone, and she told him she had come to talk with him and Arenui and Ra'anui as well. She'd known him since he was a young man – they'd been young together, and she'd helped at one of his woman's labours. They lived at Papara, and she didn't see them much, but she knew that he respected her. He looked surprised, but he didn't say no before he left. Atea was glad it was Moana first, he was large and peaceful to be near, but she didn't know if his calm had much influence on Arenui. It felt like a long wait before shadows appeared at the doorway of the hut. Moana and Arenui came in and sat down. They laid their clubs carefully beside them.

Atea bent her head. 'I'm sorry the fish I have brought are so small and so few. There are many hungry men up here. I do not mean to insult you with so little.'

They gazed back at her without a smile. She looked at Moana, trying to breathe in some of his calm. There was silence.

'Are we waiting for Ra'anui?'

'Ra'anui is not coming.' Arenui spoke impatiently.

How stupid she was. Why should more chiefs come to listen to her? Arenui rubbed his eyes – maybe he was sleeping when she came. He looked tired as well as annoyed. She could hear some of the warriors gathering outside the hut, feet shifting, murmuring. Now she was here she had to speak, there was no escape.

Trying to be still, she pressed her hands into her thighs. 'I'm glad you have come to talk with me. Thank you.' She looked from Moana to Arenui. Both gazed at her. 'I am midwife to Pomare.' Moana knew, but she wanted Arenui to know her respected position; maybe it would be some protection. 'I was called to come to you by a strong dream. I only want to speak of it – I know it is only for you to do as you decide. You are great warriors.'

You are my people, sacred to my heart – and already many of our men have been killed by the Oui-ouis.’ She took a deep breath. ‘I have been with Captain Henry from the English ship.’

Arenui looked at his hands as if he was bored, but he didn’t reply. They didn’t care that she was with Henry, and she didn’t expect them to. She wondered what Henry would think about her coming to talk with them – probably he wouldn’t like it, but her dream had to be told whatever he thought about it.

‘Captain Henry makes pictures of what he sees. I visited his ship and saw many pictures of ships, each one different, like our canoes.’ His pictures were his way of telling his people how it was in Tahiti. It was important for him to tell too. ‘Also he paints people and mountains and canoes, and I know the person or the canoe by the picture. He copies what he sees. He painted me, and he saw -’

‘And the dream?’ Arenui interrupted, rubbing his dry shins. He didn’t understand that she was trying to explain how what she saw on the ship matched her dream, but she didn’t want to anger him by going on about the paintings.

‘When I sleep beside him, each night I dream of many ships coming –’ She paused, picturing the many but struggling for how to tell them. Arenui looked at her as if he didn’t like her or her words. Moana was very still. ‘Like your camp. Someone can say to me that there are many men up here, but I cannot know how many until I see them... it was a shock when I saw how many today, when I saw all your huts and fires. In the dream there are many, many ships coming. A whole ship for each man here, and each ship full of men ready to fight.’

‘How can you know that is true?’ Moana said quietly.

‘I asked Captain Henry how many ships, and he said more than all my fingers and toes, and more than all his as well, and those of another man, and more than that too –’

‘He can say such things to give himself mana with a woman,’ said Moana.

‘That is true,’ replied Atea, ‘but his pictures tell me there are more and more. And his pictures were made before I knew him. All his other pictures are of things I can

recognise – Herenui and his canoe, the lagoon, the mountains, people I know in Moorea with Pomare. I believe those ships are true.’

Arenui was silent, gazing at her, his eyes dark. He touched his club with his fingertips as if he was reminding himself it was still there. Her hands were cold as eels although her face was sweating.

‘What do you want to say to us?’ Moana asked.

‘I come because I’m afraid for you, for all our men. It is a war with so many enemies – like waves, coming onto the beach forever.’ Arenui could kill her with one swipe of his club. Atea felt she was rushing on, but couldn’t stop herself. ‘My dreams have been full of these ships. When I woke I knew I had to speak with you. I am not asking you to give up to them – you are fearless warriors, you will decide what you do. I don’t know what Taaroa wants, but you may know better than me.’ She straightened her back. ‘I remembered the prophecy of Vaita: the foretelling of the glorious children of the Trunk, who differ from us yet are the same, coming in boats with no outriggers, and there will be an end to our present customs...and they will possess this land. I have been thinking, Vaita did not say they will possess us.’

Arenui and Moana looked at each other as if they’d decided. Both laid their hands on their clubs.

‘We are not afraid. We’ll show them we do not want them here. They cannot possess us.’ Arenui grasped his club and left.

Moana followed him without a word.

Chapter 21

Captain Henry woke to an empty hut. They'd been together for such a short while, yet being without her made him lonely. Every day Roberts sent a rowing boat from the ship with messages and supplies, and every day Henry sent it back with the message that he'd stay. He didn't want to go back; he wasn't ready.

Atea had said she was going to be visiting all day. She hadn't said who she was visiting, but Tahitian relatives needed lengthy greetings and enquiries after their health, and the health of various other relatives – anyway, she hadn't wanted to talk about it after her wearying efforts with Mrs Coe.

After washing, Henry swam lazily under the wide blue sky. Several rays joined him, rippling along in front and beneath as he made his way out across the lagoon, their dark wings frilling along their sides, propelling them smoothly forward. He'd never been so alone as a child, Eliza always nearby somewhere, close enough to call out. Even when he'd felt most alone, when Grace was sent away, Eliza came and sat in his room, sewing, or reading to him, or just sitting. After his swim he wrote to his mother and Prudence, a short letter; there was so little to say. His sorrow, their sorrow, his wishes for their health, enquiries after father. He hoped they were managing. Enquiries after Eliza's husband and children. He would write again soon. It all felt blank and lonely. Thousands of miles of sea lay between him and the Wraxall graveyard. The need to see where she was, to talk to everyone who'd been with her was sharp as hunger.

He took Vane's shell hooks and managed to catch some fish, which he cooked over a fire he built himself out of coco husks and dead palm leaves. His tinder box was dry, and he felt pleased with his small efforts, but not satisfied with fish alone, so he knocked down a breadfruit and toasted it in slices over the ashes. Atea had told him which trees belonged to whom – at first he'd thought she was joking, but she insisted everyone knew. Inside the hut he had a few books, and he tried reading but found his thoughts kept absconding from the

page to dwell on memories of Eliza. Neither Thackeray nor Disraeli could hold his attention. Both Eliza and Prudence liked Dickens. Just feel, Atea said, let the sadness be. So he lay in the hut out of the sun, but after an hour or so was too restless to stay there.

Instead, he occupied himself by wandering along the shore, then bringing a coconut palm he'd spotted into the house - a surprise for Atea. It was only a small one, just sprouting a few leaves, no higher than his navel. He dug the sprouting nut out of the sand with his hands and his knife, then fetched a cooking pot from Vane's house, and filled it with soil. It was pleasant work - he hadn't had his hands in the earth since he was a child. Although it was a different soil, light and sandy, he enjoyed the smell of it, the press of the dirt under his fingernails. He patted the earth around the coconut, then carried the gourd inside, tucking it just inside the door. Maybe Atea would be pleased to have a potted palm; she'd decorated the hut so carefully. Vane's hut was like a play house; Atea's garlands hung from the rafters, tiare flowers still scenting the air.

It was sunset when she came back. Henry was outside the hut, leaning against the wall post. Bending over him, she kissed him tenderly, then sat down beside him, reaching for the water gourd. She seemed tired.

'You were a long while,' Henry said, 'and I've tried not to be busy.' He smiled at his own joke. 'It was hard, but I've been doing nothing all day, just feeling. You're much better at it than I am.'

'There's nothing, and there's nothing...' she smiled. 'A man sitting outside his hut might look as if he's doing nothing, but he might be busy grieving for his sister...or even his island...'

She drank the last of the water in the gourd, then settled beside him, facing the pink clouds of sunset.

'Where did you go off to all day?'

'Up to the waterfall - where I met you with Johnson.'

He turned to look at her, but she was gazing at the impressive array of gold and apricot clouds over Moorea. ‘Why did you go up there? It’s a long way.’

‘I woke up early this morning, and I went fishing. I took the fish up there.’

Why hadn’t she told him? He knew what happened at the waterfall. ‘You went to meet men from the rebel camp? To give them food?’

Atea turned to him. ‘Yes, I wanted to tell them my dream – the one I told you about, with the ships coming.’

Her honesty gave Henry a jolt. ‘Did you not think of me?’

‘I told you my dream already.’ She looked quizzical.

‘I thought you might have some loyalty to me.’

‘Loyalty?’ Atea looked astonished. ‘About my dream? I don’t understand. What did you want me to do?’

‘Talk to me before you go and tell things to the rebels?’

‘I told you my dream. You weren’t very interested in it.’ She paused, frowning. ‘I didn’t tell you I was going to the camp because I feared you might try to stop me – but because it was dangerous for me, not because of your feelings...’

‘So you kept it from me.’ He felt betrayed, but he didn’t know if there was a Tahitian word for that – was that significant? Did they not understand betrayal?

Atea sat quietly frowning, then she answered. ‘I’m sorry to hurt your feelings. It was a strong dream with a message – I couldn’t be happy if I didn’t tell them. They are my people – I am loyal to them. Is that a surprise to you? You’ve been with me for a few days, so you think I must not talk to my people?’

Surprised by her argument, Henry could see that it would feel dishonourable for her, if dreams were so important, not to tell them. He would be naïve to imagine a few days of love trumped a lifetime of loyalty to her people. But what else did she discuss with the warriors?

Atea went on. ‘Now I feel like I did with Temana – that I mustn’t say things that upset him – that upset you, even if they are important for me. I always used to tell just what I

felt, and then I learned not to tell because it made him angry. But that was lying to myself – and it didn't make me feel close to him any more. I don't understand how telling my dream matters to you.'

'It's that you went to the rebels without telling me. What else did you tell them?'

But what information could she have that would be of any use to them?

'They are fighting the Oui-ouis, not you – you said the English are our friends...Is that not true?'

'We are your friends, of course we are.'

'You've been up to the camp – why should I not go?' Atea's face was glowing in the sunset; she looked angry, and beautiful.

'I went to see if I could help them.'

'Did you? So did I. I thought my dream could help – to know what is coming.' Atea shifted uneasily. 'Why do you – your people - want to be here, in Tahiti?'

'We're bringing you good things –'

Atea laughed. 'Dresses, mirrors, diseases?'

That was unfair, he thought. They had diseases before Europeans came. He had all his men checked before they set sail. 'I was thinking of learning, Christianity, civilisation...'

'I haven't learned much that I like, Henry. How to hide what I feel, how to ignore what my body tells me. We had gods before the missionaries brought your god, you know, we had chiefs before the French brought the Governor – and we still have our chiefs. Are you the same as the Oui-ouis? Why are you here with me?'

He touched her arm, hoping to calm her. 'I'm here now because I love to be with you, and I'm here in Tahiti to watch the French. I'll do everything I can to help you...come, let's not argue. I don't want to stop you seeing your people, of course I don't. I missed you today.' He stroked her arm tenderly, sliding his hand down over hers. Why were they arguing about a dream? Was it of any real importance? It was just a dream, after all. 'If you want to tell your dreams, tell your dreams. But if I knew where you were going, it would be easier for me, not wondering where you've gone.'

‘You won’t be here for much longer, will you?’ Atea leaned against him. The sun was sliding into the sea. It always seemed so fast.

‘Let’s enjoy the time we have together. Come on, let’s go in now. Or do you want me to go away?’

‘I don’t want you to go.’ A slight smile softened her mouth.

‘I cooked some fish and breadfruit for you.’

Her smile spread across the sea. ‘I am hungry.’

Henry got to his feet and bowed, gesturing towards the doorway.

‘After you, madam.’

Atea laughed as she took his proffered arm. Ceremoniously, they entered the hut, where the last traces of tiare were still scenting the air. Together, they sat down to eat. Henry had made a crude job of wrapping the cooked fish in pandanus leaves, and Atea crooned over his handiwork. But she frowned as she turned and noticed the coco palm by the door.

‘Why did you bring that in here?’

Drawing away from him, she stared at the potted tree in dismay, transfixed. Henry followed her gaze. Almost immediately, a wave of fury came towards them from the direction of the palm, powerful as a gust of wind. Both of them pressed back against the wall with the force of it, but there was no wind, no sound, and no discernable movement in the palm, which sat in its pot looking just the same - an innocent plant. Yet Henry couldn’t take his eyes off it, not even to glance at Atea. An undeniable malevolence emanated from it. He couldn’t believe what was happening. The air was loaded with menace. Silence settled over every gourd and mat and garland in the hut. The swept floor seemed to stretch out, expanding between them and the palm. Then, slowly, the intensity of the feeling began to fade, as if seeping slowly into the floor. Atea didn’t move a hair.

‘What was it?’ His voice came out as a whisper.

‘You felt it?’ She sounded wary.

He nodded, unwilling to take his eyes away from the plant. ‘It’s coming from the coconut?’

‘Tupapa’u...’ She spoke in a low voice. ‘I cleaned before you came; I swept all the corners for spirits. It was clean then. But Temana has come in with that tree. It’s one of his plants, that palm. It must be Temana.’

‘How did he do that?’ The threatening atmosphere had diminished, but an eerie silence remained. A ghost in a palm tree? She’d felt it too – something had definitely happened. He glanced at her; she was still staring at it. ‘What can we do?’

‘His spirit is angry - he hasn’t gone away. I hoped he’d gone - to Raiatea, but he hasn’t.’ She sounded scared, but not surprised. ‘He’s here.’

Henry shook his head. ‘But ... I don’t believe in spirits.’

‘But you felt it.’ Atea turned to him.

That was undeniable. His shoulders and back were still tight.

‘Yes.’

Atea’s gaze flicked back to the young tree. There was a long silence.

‘He asked me to be his woman under a coco palm, when we were first together. If we quarrelled, I’d go and lie under that same palm – to remember our love.’ She sighed. ‘After he started drinking with the Oui-ouis I went to lie there often. He knew that. The coco is his tree, like the lizard is his animal.’

Henry looked around; the mats were undisturbed, the gourds sat in a neat row. The malevolence was still fading, leaving a sickly quiet.

‘Shall I take it out?’

Ignoring his question, Atea continued. ‘Perhaps he thinks I’ve forgotten him, because I’m here with you. But it’s not so soon – everything changed between us long ago. He forgot that he loved me – he stopped talking, stopped listening.’ She bowed her head. ‘He’s angry – and jealous - he doesn’t want us to be together. He wants me to know...us to know - he’s angry.’

‘What can we do? Shall I carry it out?’

Atea’s eyes remained on the coconut. ‘Yes.’

Henry got up. Although the threatening atmosphere hadn't entirely gone, he'd rather do something than sit and watch. Atea remained behind him, her back flat against the wall. She was barely breathing. Step by step, he crossed the floor. Avoiding contact with the leaves, he bent and warily picked up the cooking pot containing the plant, carrying it outside, ready to drop it at any moment.

'Put it back in the ground,' Atea called after him, 'but don't hurt it.' She came to the doorway with a broom in her hand. 'Put it back where you got it – same place. Was it near those trees? And be kind to it.'

Once outside, the palm looked like the small, vegetable thing it was. Henry carried it back towards its original spot as the light faded. It rustled in the breeze as he walked, but it seemed to have lost its malevolent potency. Still, he didn't trust it. As he emptied it out of the cooking pot, it flopped over, trailing roots pale as feathers on the dark sand. Seeing it on the ground at his mercy Henry felt suddenly foolish. If Atea hadn't said not to hurt it he would have stamped on it, ground it into the sand with his heel. Instead, he quickly scooped a shallow hole, picked up the nut and its trailing roots and pushed them in. Perhaps she knew best. With his bare foot, he shoved sand over the roots and firmed it down, then stood back. It was a large sprouting seed, nothing more. What on earth had happened?

When he went back she was sweeping. In the last red glow from the sunset the hut looked gloomy. She dropped the broom and held onto him. They stood holding each other outside the doorway.

'Maururu,' she said, clinging on to him. 'Thank you.'

As they stood together, Henry marvelled at how they'd both experienced the same horror, at the same time, from the same direction...

'I have to make a ceremony,' Atea announced. She looked determined. 'I've been waiting to do it, but I had to be ready. I need to tell Temana I'm sorry, and help him to go. It's not good for him to stay here.'

Henry nodded. 'Tell me what happened – with Temana?'

He'd avoided asking, reluctant to spoil their idyll with talk of her husband, her suffering, her punishment. Atea looked back at him with an unreadable expression, as if it were a question she couldn't answer.

Chapter 22

So he wanted to know. Atea was glad, but first she needed to eat, so they agreed to talk afterwards. Henry ate some fish with her, then they went out on the beach, facing the glittering lagoon. A few last breaths of red stained the clouds above the sea, and stars were beginning to glow in the darkening sky. Together they wriggled into the warm dark sand. Atea sat for a while, remembering how it was with Temana. She didn't want to speak badly of him, but she wanted to tell Henry all of it so he knew how it was.

‘When my husband was small, his father left on a Oui-oui ship, to be a sailor.

Temana always wanted his father back. He was sad. His mother died soon after when many people died of the spots and the swollen throat sicknesses. Nanihi looked after him and the others that were left without mothers and fathers. Temana said that his father was sailing somewhere, and one day he'd come back. When the Oui-oui ships came, he always went to see them, wanted to be with them. Maybe he asked for news of his father, but he never said so. He learned to play their game with pictures on cards, and drank with them. He liked to talk of their ideas, and he got angry with me more and more. When he drank, he came back angry.’

Atea paused. It hurt to speak of him. Henry was quiet beside her.

‘He was jealous, accusing me of wanting other men. He didn't believe me when I told him he was wrong - he was angrier, talking about what Oui-ouis said. He shouted, and sometimes he hurt me. Hauata was afraid, and after a while she left. She wanted me to go with her, but I wanted to show Temana that I loved him, to make him stop. Ah hia. I was wrong.’

Henry's face was serious, but not yet full of horror. Maybe he wouldn't love her any more, but she'd tell him.

‘I was sad Hauata was away from me. One night I came back and my pouara were gone too – Herenui made me two wooden pouara, very beautiful, but Temana took them.’

‘I think I’ve heard this word before – pouara. What are they?’

‘They’re carvings made to remember the other babies, the ones we can’t keep, the ones who are dead but want to be with us. We used to keep them in our houses, in the roof, looking down on us, but the missionaries didn’t like it.’

Atea took a deep breath. ‘My babies; he’d dug them up from their hiding place and taken them to the Oui-ouis. Traded them. Then I knew he didn’t care about me any more. When he came back he was drunk. I shouted at him - he didn’t care about our pouara. I took his bottle in my hand. I hit him. The love between us was gone. It would never be the same. I hit him and he fell down.’

There was silence.

When she told it, it sounded strange and faraway. She wasn’t sure he understood. There was pain in his eyes, his body was stiff. He didn’t want to hear about Temana – of course he didn’t.

‘It wasn’t your fault,’ Henry said. ‘Temana was stronger than you, and drunk – perhaps he died from falling – did he hit his head on the ground?’

That was a comfort she couldn’t allow.

‘No, I wanted to hit him. Anger was in me. I chose not to go away when Hauata asked me to go, to be safe. That’s what Miri told me to do, what everyone said; to look after my own happiness. But I didn’t. I hit him very hard, Henry.’

‘You had to, to protect yourself.’

Maybe it was a comfort for him to say that. As she watched his face, she knew he’d hold onto his own way. Maybe he didn’t want to know it, but she remembered the weight of the bottle in her hand, the anger alive in her arm.

‘A man shouldn’t attack a woman. He was a warrior – of course you had to defend yourself. You put the blame only on yourself, and that’s not fair.’

That's what he wanted to believe. But she remembered the feeling: all her love was gone. She remembered fury lifting her arm.

That night, Henry slept fitfully. There was no moon, and darkness gathered inside the hut. Hearing someone calling Atea's name through thin layers of sleep, he hauled himself up onto his elbows.

‘What is it? Who are you?’

A woman squatted in the doorway, her long hair outlined by the stars behind her. She was panting. She ignored Henry.

‘Atea! I’ve come - to tell you - Iolani has begun. Her second baby. She -needs you – with her.’

Next to him, Atea sat up, rubbing her face. ‘Who is it?’

‘Tehani. Wake up! Iolani’s water is leaking – come with me -’

‘I’m coming.’ Already Atea was kneeling, feeling around for a pareo. ‘Yes, Iolani, I know – her belly has dropped. Where is she?’ She pressed her face against Henry’s cheek in a swift, wordless goodbye, fastening her pareo around herself.

Henry groaned, scratching his mosquito bites. ‘Be careful in the dark – watch out for soldiers –’

Tehani stood up. ‘She’s in the forest now – I can take you. She was quick last time, remember –’

Henry lay back down, hoping he could go back to sleep.

‘Yes,’ Atea said, ‘I’m ready.’

She joined Tehani at the doorway. ‘No, wait. Where’s your knife Henry?’

‘On my belt,’ Henry groaned. She picked up his trousers and took it, then their footsteps pattered away across the sand. Starlight filled the shape of the doorway. He drank some water then turned on his side, watching the moonlight on the sea. The knife was for the umbilicus, of course. Missing the warmth of her body, her sweet aroma of monoi oil, he wished she hadn’t gone. As the dark corners of the hut loomed around him, he found he was thinking of Temana. The palm tree was safely back outside now, he reassured himself. It

looked less than happy, but as if it would survive. Enough of that, he thought, no more ghosts. It was strange that Atea took all the blame for Temana's death. She'd never attack anyone; she was so gentle and loving. None of the other islanders avoided her, or seemed to hold it against her – quite the reverse. He turned over onto his back, away from the doorway. All this thinking wasn't helping him sleep. The dozens of mosquito bites he'd collected itched.

He got up and dipped his hand into the gourd of coco milk, pressing the liquid onto his bites, but it didn't afford much relief. His ankles and wrists still sizzled, and he couldn't resist rubbing, enjoying the luxury of scratching though knowing it would only make his discomfort worse. Pesky mosquitoes; English gnat bites were trivial compared to the lumps inflicted by their Tahitian cousins. Grumpily feeling around in the dark, he threw on his shirt, then walked straight down the beach in his bare feet, into the blessed cool surf.

Paddling under the stars was far better than fidgeting about in the hut. He pushed up his sleeves and thrust his forearms into the water, glancing back towards the dark doorway. Swishing his arms in the shallows, he slowed his breathing to match the gentle roll and drag of the waves as Atea had shown him, settling into the rhythm. He began to feel calm and peaceful. Thinking of Atea attending the birth, he hoped Iolani's baby would come quickly and easily. Atea even seemed to believe it possible to have an enjoyable birth – not the impression he'd got from hearing his mother's muffled cries when his sisters were born. Once his itching had calmed in the cool water, he wandered further along the beach in the direction of Pape'ete, delighting in the restful sigh of the waves.

The tide was out, and the starlight breathed silvery patches on the darkness of the black sand. Black sand still seemed odd to him – so hot in the daytime when it absorbed the sun's heat, and almost impossible to walk on barefoot, although the thick soled Tahitians had no such problems. The beach curved ahead towards the headland, broken up by the lumpy shapes of a few black rocks. From the position of the stars, he guessed it was almost dawn. A frail yellowish light was just discernable along the horizon, washing a shimmer

across the sea. Yes, it looked as if the southern cross was beginning to fade. Dawn would come soon. Then he could return to Vane's hut and rest until Atea returned.

As he drew closer to the headland, he thought he heard a distant beating. Strange. Drumbeats? Dancing was forbidden, although Atea said sometimes there were gatherings in the forest. But not at this hour, surely? The faraway noise was getting closer. What could it be? It began to sound more like feet pounding on the sand, not as loud or as even as horses' hooves, but definitely getting closer. As he peered ahead towards the headland, the apparent source of the sounds, it seemed as if the outline of the rocks was shifting. The hair on the back of his neck prickled. Were the rocks moving?

One of the rocks separated from the others and advanced towards him. Dull slaps beat through the air, heavy smacks like feet on sand, and the pant of breath alongside. Yet the shape coming towards him didn't look like a person. What was it? His eyes strained in the gloom – the starlight wasn't much help. He bent lower, trying to get a better view against the sky. Now more rocks were separating out. Outlines that made no sense detached themselves from the headland, moving across the beach. They had more legs or arms than a person, and a strange gait. Giant crabs? He stopped dead. There were crabs that lived in large holes on some of the beaches, and he'd heard of crabs that climbed trees – but these were impossibly huge, and panting.

Instinctively, he glanced back towards Vane's hut. Damn - it was too far to run. There was nowhere to hide; the forest too far away, and the lightening sky behind him. He must be silhouetted against the sky – they must have seen him. Atea had his knife. What could he do? They were maybe a hundred yards away. Dear God, they were coming straight at him. Even the hairs on his legs bristled. It was tempting to crouch, but he was damned if he was going to meet them cowering. Why the blazes had he come out in just his blasted shirt? No Englishman should die in his shirtsleeves. He could run into the sea, but they'd probably be more comfortable in the water than he would. He spread his own legs, sinking his toes into the sand. Perhaps he could wrench off their claws, wrestle them down. At least he could die like a man. Three or four were advancing on him, and more behind. Dozens

more. Was he asleep? Six legs on each? But the breeze was cool on his neck, and the sand hard beneath his feet. No nightmare was so real.

Where was Atea? He hoped she was safe in the forest, hidden away somewhere. If only he'd stayed in the hut. His legs were suddenly like wood as he realised they were spreading out around him in a pincer action. Their heads were outlined against the lightening sky – no neck, huge shoulders and long dangling arms in front – and at the sides too. The sound of their feet on the sand convinced him they weren't apparitions. Then the slap, slap of feet stopped. They were perhaps ten yards away. They had hair and something like feelers coming out of their heads - and extra legs in front. His skin crawled. The one in front of him raised an arm as it approached, holding a club outlined against the horizon. A crab with a club? It didn't make sense. Henry held his own arms out to show he had no weapons – if they understood, or cared. His legs felt weak, but he was damned if he was going to run.

'Frani?' The deep voice that came out of the monster was human. Thank God. It nodded its neckless head, and spoke again. 'Oui-oui?'

It was speaking Tahitian. There was something familiar about the voice. With relief, Henry realised that the feelers on their heads were palm fronds. But the club stayed aloft. The monster stepped towards him.

Henry straightened up, determined not to buckle. 'I'm not Oui-oui, not French. I'm Captain Henry,' he said. 'English.'

The other figures edged closer, the faint light of dawn revealing a blur of human faces above confusing bodies. How many? Maybe forty or fifty of them, and more coming across the sands.

'Tapitane Henry.' The one on his left moved closer.

They knew him? He couldn't place the voice. Slowly, the club was lowered. Henry kept his knees firm. They drew in closer as the biggest one spoke again.

'I am chief Arenui. We talked at the mountain camp – at Faoutaoua.'

Relief flooded through his body. They were men he knew. Living people he could speak with and understand.

‘I remember you,’ he said, bowing. He did; even the flakes of fish on Arenui’s lips as they’d talked.

‘We made night hunt for Frani.’ Arenui slapped his front, and the legs that seemed to dangle from his chest shook.

Still unable to make sense of the form in front of him, Henry stared. There was the gleam of naked flesh, and the smell of blood. Was Arenui carrying a body? It looked almost as if he had buttocks in front, but that couldn’t be.

‘Gens d’armes.’ Arenui shook his shoulders, turning sideways so that Henry could see the arms hanging down his back, swinging as he twitched from side to side, almost as if dancing. ‘Arms.’ The men around him laughed. ‘My arms are stronger!’ He whacked his bulging front with his club, far too hard. No man would hit himself in the chest like that.

It dawned on Henry that Arenui was actually wearing the corpse of a French soldier. It wasn’t slung around his shoulders as one might carry a dead animal, but instead it was somehow draped over him, with the head, chest and arms hanging down his back, while the pelvis and legs dangled down his front. How could that be? He glanced around at the other warriors with bodies hanging over them in the same manner, and others behind, not all so burdened. As he began to understand, he realised that the bodies were partly naked – bare buttocks curved white, just discernable against the lightening sky. His stomach lurched. The corpses seemed to be still wearing their jackets.

They were wearing human carcasses like looted trophies? Henry groped for something to say as he tried to work it out. ‘You make night raid? On the Oui-oui garrison?’ Christ Almighty, he sounded stupid. ‘These are Frani – Frenchmen?’

‘Yes.’ Casually, Arenui dropped his club on the sand and took off his palm garland, throwing it down beside his weapon. It appeared they were no threat to him now they knew who he was. ‘We go back to Faoutaoua now.’ Planting his feet further apart, he grasped the hips that lay on his chest, and in one pragmatic movement, he lifted the carcass over his head and dumped it at Henry’s feet.

The belly was slit open. Henry stepped back in revulsion. Without thinking, his hand went to his own stomach. The body had been eviscerated, and a hole cut where the organs used to be, big enough for Arenui to push his head through. Trying not to show his horror, he glanced at the men on either side of Arenui – they were wearing corpses in just the same way, heads to the rear, naked buttocks at the front. Henry stared at the chief's splayed, capable toes as if checking his humanity. Please God let me wake. The way the dead Frenchman's face pressed into the sand was so wrong that Henry wanted to move it, but instead he stayed carefully still. His nose was pushed into the sand, his moustache black against the black sand. Naked flesh gleamed yellow in the dawn light. The soldier's arms had landed akimbo. It felt disrespectful even to look at him in this state. His chest was too flat, too wide, yet still wearing his gens d'armes jacket. Blood and ordure stained the breeze as Arenui rolled his shoulders and rubbed his face. He seemed relaxed and friendly. Were those smears of blood around his shoulders, on his cheeks? Henry swallowed, silent with shock.

The chief turned to one of the men behind him. 'Rahiti. You take this one.' Casually, he retrieved his garland, pressing it down over his hair. 'We made a raid on the curfew soldiers outside Pape'ete. Tried their sleeping place - garrison. Got some, but most inside. Too many men. Too many guns.'

Arenui lifted up his club and brought it down in a clean arc onto the dead soldier's buttocks.

Bone crunched, and the moustache pressed further into the sand. The curve of the arse flattened over broken pelvis. Henry's stomach somersaulted as Arenui shouldered his club with the air of someone who'd just straightened a picture hanging awry. So that's what they did – they beat the body flat, breaking the bones. When the soldiers were living or dead? That's why they looked so misshapen. Rahiti came forward and lifted the eviscerated body over his head, carelessly, as if it were something inanimate, not a dead man.

'Frani necklace,' he grinned at Henry. 'They give our women necklace. We make them our necklace.'

Arenui brushed down his chest with his hands, like a satisfied man brushing off spilled snuff. 'Ia orana, Tapitane Henry.'

And he led his men away at a trot, veering across the beach. As if rooted to the spot, Henry watched them disappear into the shadows at the edge of the forest.

Looking down at his own feet, Henry noticed a strip of skin with flesh attached, pale on the black sand among their scuffed footprints. A ribbon with a bubble of red dribbled by it, like seaweed, but here there was no seaweed. He turned towards Vane's house. On shaky legs, he walked towards its fragile shelter. There was bile in his mouth. Where was Atea? Please God she was hidden deep in the forest. Please God she was safe.

Chapter 23

After worrying for what seemed like hours, wondering if he should try to search the forest, but knowing it would be futile, Henry had been delighted at Atea's safe return. By the time she came back it was late morning, and the scene of Henry's grisly encounter looked so innocent as they sat at the door of the hut, with the story of the warriors tumbling out. He found it hard to believe it had really happened, but Atea seemed unsurprised. She got up and went to wash in the sea. Henry followed her, steering her towards the remnant of skin. She nodded at it, then walked into the shallows and splashed herself with water. Henry stood beside her while she washed meticulously, questioning her about the warriors from the camp at Faoutaoua.

'I thought Tahitians didn't like to touch dead people -'

'Don't worry, Henry, they won't hurt us. They went to kill Oui-ouis.'

'What will they do with those bodies?'

Atea shrugged. 'I don't know.' She gazed out to sea as she rubbed her shoulders and under her arms. Why didn't she seem more shocked? Was she used to this kind of behaviour?

'Do they eat them?'

She frowned at him as if it was a stupid question. 'No. They don't do that.'

'But why carry them up there? Did you see them? Did you know they were doing a night raid?' She seemed so absorbed in her washing that he wasn't sure she was taking him seriously enough.

Atea frowned again. 'No, Henry, we were busy. I was looking after Iolani – she's so quick we have to be careful she doesn't tear -'

Did she understand what he was asking? She seemed so unsurprised, even impatient with him. 'Have you ever eaten – meat from people? Do Arenui and his men do that?'

Atea stopped washing. Her expression convinced him even before she spoke.

‘No, I’ve never eaten that! Women don’t even eat turtle meat!’ She turned away from him. ‘I don’t know what Arenui is doing – he’s a great warrior. Maybe he wants to frighten the Oui-ouis. I don’t know. Stop asking me. I don’t know.’

He thought of Captain Cook, killed and eaten by cannibals – but that was in New Zealand. How close were the habits of Maoris to Tahitians? They had tattoos, similar dances, and were also famously fierce warriors. It was sickening to think of it. Arenui’s great white teeth.

‘You’ve never seen that – what I saw? Cutting the hole – wearing a man like a necklace?’

‘Never. But I don’t go to battles. I don’t go to the camps.’

‘Do you think it happens?’

‘You told me what you saw. I believe you, Henry. I’ve heard it happens, but I haven’t seen that. Warriors smash the bones and wear the body over their heads like a tibuta, to show their victory. But I don’t know what they do with them. There are different chiefs and they lead their men. Arenui is a man who has ideas... but the women take them food.’

His own men could be in danger of becoming gruesome necklaces. If the French did concede Tahiti to England, he’d have to deal with these warriors in future. It certainly put a different complexion on the possibility of taking over from the French, of having to fight such an enemy.

‘Some of those Oui-ouis are bad, you know.’ Suddenly Atea looked as if she might weep, her dark brows pushed together, her hair falling forwards. ‘Remember they have done many, many things to us. Terrible things. Don’t forget how many people have died. More than half my people.’ She leaned down and scooped up sand in her hands, rubbing it hard between her palms and across the backs of her hands. Gobs of dark sand spattered back into the water.

Henry nodded. ‘Yes. The gens d’armes. I know.’ He wasn’t sure that the French could be blamed for the deaths of so many Tahitians, but this wasn’t the time to dispute that.

‘They’ve done things to me, and to other people. You don’t know all the bad things they do. Nightcrawling. They come in the huts.’ Atea shivered. ‘I don’t want to talk about them now. Let me wash. I have to wash.’

Henry tried to wrench his thoughts away from his terrors of the previous night, standing quietly as Atea began to wash again. He looked across the sea at the sun shining on the mountains of Moorea. A canoe was approaching.

‘How was the birth?’

Atea carried on washing without answering.

‘Boy or girl?’

‘It was pouara,’ she sighed.

‘It died?’

‘Yes, it is dead.’

‘That’s sad – I’m so sorry.’ What an idiot he was, going on about his own experiences, ignoring hers. She’d had to deal with a dead baby and a traumatic birth. It couldn’t be easy going out in the forest at night to deliver babies, yet she’d never once complained about it.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t think.’ He pushed his hands into his hair, ashamed of his stupidity. ‘How is Iolani?’

‘She can bear it. She is making ceremonies now for the pouara.’

Atea was frowning, shaking water from her hands. The canoe was coming closer – it was Heremanu.

‘I’m sorry about the baby,’ Henry said quietly.

She looked up at him. ‘There have to be pouara. It’s what Taaroa asks.’

Her eyes looked tired. Of course, she’d been awake most of the night too. He put his arm around her, but she didn’t lean into him as she usually did.

Heremanu was shouting. ‘Atea!’

Henry waved back. Atea bent down and splashed water on her face as Heremanu paddled closer.

‘You helped Mrs Coe! I heard it from Aiata.’

Heremanu didn’t sound especially celebratory. Atea was being very modest, standing quietly.

‘Why did you help her? That beetle!’ Heremanu’s paddle swished in the shallows as he manoeuvred his canoe.

‘She’s a woman.’ Atea sounded very serious.

Henry glanced at her in surprise – she looked oddly still, almost frozen. Now he was close, Henry could see Heremanu’s face was lined with anger. Why wasn’t he pleased?

‘Don’t help them. Now there’s another one! Growing until he can take women and kill men - no one wants you to help them.’

In silence, Atea spread her hands out above the sea.

Heremanu thrust his paddle into the lagoon, turning his canoe. ‘Ai! There’s no need. Leave them to die.’

She looked as if she might weep. Henry moved closer to her. Presumably he was one of ‘them’ too.

As he paddled away Heremanu shouted back over his shoulder. ‘She didn’t ask for your help. She didn’t want it.’

*

After his canoe had disappeared they rested on the warm sand, side by side, breathing with the waves as they lapped over their feet.

‘Did you know people would be angry if you helped the missionaries?’

‘Grandmother Puatea taught me to help all women...’ Atea shrugged. ‘I was unhappy to leave her when I knew I could try.’

‘Why was Heremanu so angry?’

‘No one wants me to help. That’s what he said. They are popa’a. Sometimes he goes up to the camp with the other men.’

‘But the Coes are English, not French. They’re not your enemy. You were brave to help Mrs Coe – kind, and brave.’

‘Popa’a have been killing us for a long while.’

Henry was silent, thinking of the accounts he’d read, skirmish after skirmish. The pox the sailors brought. And if he had to take over from Governor Brouat, he would be the enemy.

Atea sat up. ‘There’s something I want you to do, to help me.’

‘Yes?’ She’d never asked for his help before, although she’d done so much to help him.

‘I have to go to Raiatea. That’s what Temana needs. He’s asking - that’s why he came – in the coco palm. Now I must go.’ She sighed and pushed at the wet sand with her foot. ‘Until now I didn’t want to – I didn’t feel strong enough. But I know he wants a ceremony to help him go, or he’ll be a tupapa’u, a ghost, unable to leave. His people will be glad if I do this with them.’

Henry imagined Atea arriving on an island full of Temana’s angry relatives. It was not a comfortable thought.

‘But you haven’t seen them since he died – will you be safe?’

‘Of course they’re sad, and angry, too, I know that. But they know I loved him - we visited Raiatea together many times; they knew us together. They want me to make ho’oponopono for him.’ She paused, looking up at him. ‘Henry, will you come with me?’

He was surprised. Although he could understand why she wanted to go - it seemed like the same sort of impulse that made him want to see Elizabeth’s grave –surely his presence might be difficult.

‘His family won’t want me there, will they? They want to see you, but to bring a man with you – a popa’a man?’

Atea looked disappointed. His lack of vocabulary made it so hard to be tactful. He wanted to say that it might cause offence, that surely he had no place in ceremonies for her dead husband.

‘You can’t pretend to a spirit. Temana knows I love you – that’s why he came to us together in Vane’s house. We don’t have to hide. I want you to come because it’ll be hard – anger will be all around me. If you’re with me I’ll feel stronger.’

Atea took his hand.

Henry looked back at her. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Ho’oponopono can help you, too - you can do it for Eliza -’

‘What is it?’

‘Everyone says sorry, makes it right. It helps to say sorry and to let go - for her and for you. I can tell you, but you have to do it to understand.’ She looked up at him. ‘Will you come?’

He wasn’t convinced. ‘Won’t Temana’s people be angry if I’m with you?’

‘They’re angry anyway, they won’t care about you. I want you to come to be with me. We’ll make ho’oponopono and then Temana can journey to the mountain. Will you come? Please?’

He’d given himself far too much importance in this scenario. He could see the loneliness in her as she looked up at him, and the strain of the task she was facing. It was mystifying, yet if he didn’t make any attempt to understand her, and her people, he’d be missing an opportunity. He hadn’t come all this way to stick his head in a bucket. A strong compulsion to go with her took him by surprise.

‘Yes. I’ll come.’

Although it was probably rash, he heard himself say it with calm authority. The ship and his men could survive without him – there was nothing to be done there of any urgency. Roberts might fuss, but he could do something useful while he was there - talk with the chiefs in Raiatea about resistance to the French. They’d been planning to go there sometime anyway.

Atea put her head against his chest.

‘Thank you. Maururu.’

He put his arms around her.

Sometimes when he held Atea, he wondered what she knew that he didn't. Although his mind still told him that a visit from the dead Temana couldn't have happened, it undeniably had. The evidence of his senses was too powerful to dismiss. Did she see and feel things like that all the time? It was inexplicable, yet, to Atea, it seemed unsurprising, part of everyday life. Séances were popular with certain types at home, but he'd never heard of the direct manipulation of the spirit world that Atea seemed to be suggesting now. Perhaps he could find out something other visitors hadn't encountered.

'So - how long will it take?' He had plenty of time to fill, and Roberts might even be pleased to have an excursion.

Atea shrugged. 'Some days.'

Henry smiled at her typically Tahitian answer. 'How many?'

'We sail there – the sea and the winds decide – and two days there making ho'oponopono. Then back again.'

Henry nodded. 'My men will be happy to sail to another island. They get bored being on the ship so much. A journey will be good for them -'

'Aita!' Atea interrupted him. 'No. We won't go in your ship. Herenui will take us – it's better that way.'

'In a canoe? But it's a long way in a canoe – we'll be comfortable in my ship, and safe. Quicker, too.'

'You'll be comfortable. Going in your ship is wrong.' Atea pushed at the sand with her toes. 'Herenui has a sea canoe – Nunui will come to find the way – and make the ho'oponopono, and maybe another strong man for paddling –'

'What?'

'You won't need to paddle.' Atea wriggled her feet so they sank further into the sand. 'And we'll bring Hauata back, if she wants to come.' Her voice softened as she said her daughter's name. 'She won't want to go on your ship - with all your men. She is used to canoes.'

Atea's negotiating skills would make her a good diplomat. She hadn't asked him for anything else, and all she wanted was his presence. Dark hair curled at the nape of her neck, her head bent as she waited for his answer. He so wanted to help her, but he wondered how he could put it to Roberts - a sea journey in a native canoe – vessels they'd thought so crude when they first saw them in Hawaii. Tahitians made this kind of journey at the drop of a hat, sometimes setting off on a whim at sunset to make huge journeys – like sailing to Norway from Poole. Obviously they were capable, but he was used to his own quarters, a deck to stroll on, a ewer and basin. How would they manage without the heads? But he hadn't come here to sit on a beach. Informing Roberts was going to be no easy task.

‘All right. I'll come.’

Atea kissed him.

‘Maururu. You are good to me, Henry.’

*

When Atea went to Pape'ete she felt how good it was to be at Vane's with Henry; the pleasant feelings in her body drained away as she walked towards the huts gathered at the bay. The popa'a buildings shouldered in amongst them, tall, awkward shapes against the sky. Oui-oui soldiers stood by the barricades they'd made over the path, watching her walk towards them. They did nothing, nothing at all – but any soldiers were too many. She wished Miri was with her. They watched her, the butts of their guns resting in the dirt at their feet, their hands casual around the dark shafts of the barrels. She kept her head still and her eyes ahead, not looking at them, as if they were the wood of their barricades. All the paths to Pape'ete were choked with their barriers.

She was cleaning, cleaning as she walked, feeling the struggle of fear in her throat, welcoming it, letting it be, then breathing it out. Just for now, just for now. As she got closer, the smell of them took her back to the garrison cell. Were these two men the same

ones who held her down and forced her? They stopped talking as she came close. She held her belly steady and her hands loose. One had a moustache. Was it him? She swallowed, thinking how it must make them sick with the dishonour, forcing women like that. No woman could trust a man who did that. No mother could be proud of such a son.

Cleaning, cleaning, she walked around the barrier, looking towards Miri's hut. It was safe there. The soldiers made slow, pretend salutes. She didn't answer the greetings sliding like eels towards her ears.

'Bon jour, bon jour – chérie...'

Instead she looked at the sea and walked on. When she got to the huts near the harbour, her relatives greeted her as they always did - ia orana, ia orana, all smiling and asking about her health. With each one she stopped and greeted them. Aunt Amura had a trouble with her knee. Tita was worried about her sons at Faoutaoua; she had a dream about them. It was good to feel them looking in her eyes, not just at the marks on her face. Warmed by their talk, she went to find Herenui. He sat in the shade of his boat on the beach, patting the sand beside him. After all their hellos, and some shrugging about fishing that morning, she began to speak about sailing to Raiatea.

Chapter 24

While Atea was gone, Henry lay in the relative cool of the hut, listening to a cock crowing in the distance – apparently it had as hazy a notion of time as most islanders – it was mid afternoon. As he listened, he had the feeling someone was coming. Bored enough to want to investigate, he got up and looked along the beach, and out to sea, but he could see nothing. He sat down again in the shade. It unnerved him when the launch came into view around the headland. Maybe Atea was right; she said if he stopped doing so much, he'd feel more.

As the launch approached, he got up and walked down to meet it.

The men's backs bent in a regular rhythm. One was a far better oarsman than the other – white splashes leapt only on one side, catching crabs, as his father called it. Henry knew Roberts would be riled by their lazy rowing, and felt a rush of affection - it would be good to see him. He'd be shocked to hear about the warrior-crabs. With surprise, Henry realised he'd only been on shore for five days, but it felt longer. As the launch grated on the sand, Henry waded into the shallows to help land the boat.

'No need to get wet, Captain,' Roberts called.

Henry ignored him - his feet already bare. He was only wearing his shirt to keep the sun off; most days he'd given that up too. The men jumped into the water, saluting. They looked incongruous standing at attention up to their knees in water. Henry smiled as he thought how their eyes would've started from their heads if they'd seen him the day before, wearing only Atea's pareo. Life on the Salamander seemed far away and strange. Suddenly conscious of his rumpled shirt, he felt as if he'd forgotten how to be Captain. It seemed so ridiculous to salute back in rolled up trousers and shirtsleeves. Roberts bowed as he stood to disembark.

The oarsmen remained at attention, greasy with sweat, reminding him of their crowded quarters on board, slung with hammocks and drying linen, thick with the smell of bodies in spite of the open hatches and sea breezes. He hadn't missed the fleas and ticks, the

crooning chickens in their foetid coop. It was like a distant memory, yet here they were in front of him, bringing the odour of the ship with them. Henry noticed they were barefoot too; something he knew Roberts didn't favour.

At a word from Roberts, the two sailors turned away, dismissed. They wandered off along the beach towards Pape'ete, kicking the surf at one another, bending to douse their heads in the incoming waves. There was something liberated about their demeanour, larking like schoolboys at the end of term. Side by side, Roberts and Henry watched in silence, waiting for them to be gone. One of them smacked the water with the heel of his palm, sending an arc of spray towards the other. Playful oaths drifted back. Henry was glad to see them go. Awkwardly, he did up a few shirt buttons.

'Don't these islands make boys of us all?'

Roberts frowned into the distance. 'Yet, with respect, sir, we are men.'

Henry noted the reproachful tone, and tried to sound a warmer note.

'Those two seem well rested. Didn't Seaman Bell have quite a scurvy when we first arrived?'

'Yes, sir.' Roberts gave a curt nod. 'And you seem much improved, too, sir.'

Henry was bemused by Roberts' formality; he wasn't usually so stiff. 'I've been having a quiet time. The sea's so soothing – that particular turquoise – there's nothing quite like it...'

His eyes were drawn back to the water as he thought of his underwater swim with Atea. The black sand spread over his toes, while a crab tiptoed past his feet towards Roberts' damp boots. He thought of Arenui and his men, but he didn't want to mention that to Roberts – not yet.

'Captain, will you soon be resuming command?'

With a shock, Henry realised he hadn't even considered this yet.

'Why - is there something wrong?' Henry asked.

'It has been five days, Sir. There have been questions.'

Time seemed to have become meaningless, stretched out and yet still not long enough. Henry pictured his quarters, and his throat felt tight. He realised he'd stopped breathing. No, he didn't want to go back, not yet. He leaned over as if to get a closer look at the crab. Its mouthparts were waving. He bent down, trying to pick it up by the sides of its shell as Atea had showed him. It was the type of crab the Tahitians used to make a fermented drink, but he couldn't tell Roberts that.

Roberts cleared his throat.

'Shall we go up to the house,' Roberts suggested. 'It's hot here in the sun.'

Once at Vane's house, Henry sat Roberts on the best of the two rickety chairs outside in the shade. Roberts glanced inside the door, but Henry didn't want him going in. Instead, they sat where he and Atea often sat in the afternoon, looking at the sea and the sky. He poured Roberts a cup of coconut milk. Roberts sat looking at the milk as if it were suspect.

'I'm afraid I don't have anything stronger, but there's fish and poe'ee to eat...'

'Thank you, no. I mastered a bowl of cook's porridge earlier.'

Roberts sat in silence. Perhaps he didn't like to be offered the native dish, Henry thought. He remembered when he and Roberts had visited Queen Pomare, watching while she ate fish and poe'ee with her hands off the porcelain plates sent to her as a gift from their own queen. Maybe Roberts remembered their consternation on that occasion. Henry resisted the urge to tell him that he'd since discovered that eating with one's hands could be thoroughly enjoyable.

'The fish is very good...'

'I've given up eating at midday, Sir. It's too hot.' Roberts was always careful of his digestion. He took a reluctant sip from his cup. 'Perhaps you'd like me to send over a case of port?'

'Oh, I don't think so,' Henry replied. 'We don't feel the need for strong drink.'

The 'we' hung in the air between them.

Roberts laughed. 'You talk as if you're – ah – settled, with, um...'

‘Atea.’ Henry nodded. ‘I’m glad you suggested I came here.’ He leaned back, opening his arms to include all that they surveyed. ‘It’s been good to rest – thank you, Roberts. It was just what I needed.’

Roberts looked embarrassed.

‘I didn’t envisage that you’d be sharing your accommodation with – ah -anyone else, Sir.’

‘No, neither did I. Atea came of her own free will.’

‘Sir, it may be pleasant enough for you, but I’m afraid it’s difficult – for the men.’ Roberts sat straighter in his chair. ‘I mean, they’re forbidden to set up – ah – domestic arrangements – with native women, yet they’re aware of your current... circumstances...’

‘News travels fast.’ Of course they knew. ‘I’m not answerable to them concerning my personal relationships. She’s helped me a lot.’

‘I don’t doubt it.’ Roberts put down his cup. ‘The crew have heard gossip.’ He hesitated. ‘They’re singing a vulgar song about you and that woman – ‘

‘She’s not *that woman*!’ Henry tried to control his flare of anger, staring out to sea. ‘In fact, as Pomare’s midwife, according to the native hierarchy, Atea is of equal rank to the Queen herself. More importantly, she’s very kind.’

Roberts wasn’t a deep thinker, but he’d always thought him essentially fair.

‘I’m sorry, Sir, I didn’t mean to offend –‘ Roberts rubbed his palms on his breeches. ‘My point is that it’s hard to maintain a firm line with the men when you’re absent – and seem to have set up home...’ Roberts took a breath. ‘I mean, she seems pleasant enough, but surely I don’t need to remind you that she’s not only a native, but a self confessed murderer.’

Henry kept his voice even and low as he responded. ‘That’s just where we’ve all been mistaken. I’ll not take your words awry, Roberts, I understand why you say that, and you mean well, but she’s not a murderer. You don’t know her side of the matter, unfortunately, and the Governor didn’t trouble to find out the facts. Her husband was a known drunk, and he was attacking her –‘

Roberts interrupted. ‘With all due respect, Sir - she did confess to murder.’

Henry got up. 'Of course she admitted it; she felt responsible – but that doesn't mean she was!' He paced to and fro beside their chairs. 'Think for just one moment. She was prepared to take the blame, and there was no need – isn't there nobility in that? Have you noticed how the Tahitians treat her? With respect, man, with genuine respect.'

Roberts pursed his lips.

'They might be well advised to, Captain.'

'They respect her because she deserves it. She took the blame for her husband's death, although he mistreated her – and then she took the punishment –'

'Sir, whatever she's done or hasn't done, it might be politic to be a tad more discreet. Come back to the ship: then the men will be reassured, and you can visit her, if you must –'

'Are you suggesting that we should creep about like criminals?'

'Sir, she *is* a criminal.'

Henry stopped pacing. 'I've already told you I don't agree with that assessment – and even worse than that, we could have stopped her barbaric punishment – we may even be culpable for her ordeal.'

'What do you mean?' Roberts frowned. 'We had nothing to do with it.'

'That day we first called on the Governor – don't you remember the woman who stopped us on the way? That was Miri, Atea's cousin. She begged us to help...'

Roberts shook his head. 'I recall a madwoman striking herself about the head with a shark's tooth, spattered with blood and incoherent; I hardly think we should have taken her hysterics to heart.'

'On the contrary. She was upset – she understood what a sacrifice Atea was making. If we'd troubled to listen more carefully, if I'd questioned the Governor about his 'trial', they might have understood their error.' Henry stared at his First Lieutenant. 'The man who stands by is as culpable as those who take action.'

'You did mention it to Bruat.' Roberts stood up beside Henry.

‘Not enough. It was my duty to question him – but I was too disturbed by Miri’s passions. Too dismissive. Now I realise she was grief stricken, desperate – her dearest friend was under threat of execution –’

‘I understand that it would be distressing, yes, Sir, of course, but I don’t see the need to strike oneself –’

‘D’you know – when I got the news of Eliza ...if I had a shark’s tooth...’

Roberts bowed his head. Henry felt the sadness of a great distance between them as they stood almost shoulder to shoulder. In the past his own reactions would have been much the same as Roberts’, but now his judgement had shifted, and it seemed he couldn’t share his new perspective.

‘I sincerely hope that you wouldn’t make such a display of yourself, *Captain*.’

Henry noticed the stress on the word Captain. He sat down, his anger subsiding into sadness. Yet he wasn’t willing to give up. Roberts sat too, taking a brave swig of his coconut milk.

‘I’m planning to go to Raiatea,’ Henry announced.

Roberts looked up, smiling at last. ‘Excellent news! That’ll give the men something to occupy them – a change of scene should be good for everyone. When shall we embark? Soon, I hope?’

Henry shook his head. ‘I don’t mean to take the Salamander.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘I’m going with Atea.’

‘What?’ Roberts’ face was a picture of horror.

‘She has to attend a ceremony, and fetch her daughter, who’s been staying there. It may be an opportunity to determine the attitude of the Raiateans towards the resistance here.’ Henry spoke in a slow, decided manner so Roberts would know that he’d brook no argument.

Roberts exhaled before he replied. 'With all due respect, Captain, I don't understand why you should go – putting yourself in danger - you can't be planning to go in one of those outriggers?'

Henry gazed back at his First Lieutenant.

Roberts continued. 'Those boats are nothing more than hollowed out logs. I know some of them are good sailors – but, sir - why put yourself in their hands?'

'You know as well as I that they go to other islands routinely - with no expectation of injury or loss.'

'But sir -'

'No. It's not your place to dispute my decisions.'

'But these people can be unpredictable - I don't think it's wise - on your own - we could follow you in the ship – escort you -'

'Roberts. I've decided. Should I remind you I'm your commanding officer?'

'No, Captain.' Roberts rubbed his temples. 'You don't need to remind me. But with all respect, I'll be in command while you make this journey. It's hard enough with you on shore with your... But if you choose to go off with her – in a canoe -' He dropped his voice. 'To be frank, I'm worried, Captain. I have to admit, I don't feel confident. Even the marines are becoming unreliable...I don't seem to have the same authority as you.'

Henry seized Roberts' admission.

'I think you exaggerate. You wanted the chance to try your hand, and now you realise what task it is. But you must have confidence; that's what they want to see. Things can't have changed that much – you're too critical of yourself, Roberts – if you don't believe in your ability, how can you expect them to? They're sitting at anchor, bored, I grant you, but they've nothing to complain of – they've got fresh food, clean water, shore leave... Practise a commanding manner. Don't give up your authority to them and their peccadillos.'

Roberts shook his head. 'I don't think it's my command that's at fault. You haven't seen how they are. Ever since they got wind of your – household arrangements, there've been murmurings. The talk is that you've abandoned command. Insolence is rife. They obey

orders, but with an impertinence I've not seen before. You saw them.' Roberts looked down the beach in the direction the sailors had taken. 'Sir, I believe mutiny may not be far away...'

Henry sighed. 'That's ridiculous. Impertinence and murmurings are not a mutiny.' Roberts was prone to exaggeration. 'There are always murmurings.'

'You're not there, sir. And they know where you are. Why should they resist the temptation to abscond into the arms of some woman when you're doing precisely that? The situation has changed since you left. They're cooped up while you're... If you could hear the songs they're singing –'

'Get a grip, man. They can't expect the same privileges as officers. If you remember, it was your suggestion that I came here.'

'I didn't know you'd be away so long, or in these – circumstances.'

For a moment, Henry wondered if Roberts was jealous of his 'circumstances'.

Roberts continued. 'And I suspect the French are about to attack the rebel camp, not that Bruat has sent word – why should he? But their manoeuvres have changed; they've stopped drilling so much in the mornings, and they have target practice in the forest –'

Even if that were so, thought Henry, a French attack shouldn't affect his people. Perhaps Arenui's night raid would provoke an attempt at subjugation, but that needn't affect his plans. The English were not expected to take part in military action, Roberts knew that as well as he did. Roberts was playing his last card.

'Look, I'm sure you can maintain control for a few more days. I'll make this journey; straight there and back, and when I return I'll resume command.' He turned to face Roberts. 'I need more time.'

Roberts drained his cup and set it down on the sand.

'What's so special about this Atea?'

There was a long silence.

The many evenings they'd spent together learning Tahitian vocabularies and reading missionary accounts did not entitle Roberts to such directness. For a moment, they simply stared at each other, but out of respect for their friendship, Henry decided to answer.

'She sees me as I am.'

He surprised himself by saying so, but that was the truth. With her, he wasn't a captain, son or brother – but a man, with all the complications of his past like a cage around his ability to love. She'd ignored the cage and reached in.

Roberts' face flushed as he took hold of Henry's sleeve.

'For the love of God, listen to me. Try to think of it from the men's point of view. I hesitate to blaspheme, but to them, this is Heaven on earth. The sun shines, food falls from the trees, women are beautiful and accommodating, and most of their young men are away in the hills. Glory be! Our sailors can eat to their heart's content, relax in the sun and spend all night fornicating. This is what they've dreamed of! What do they have to go back to? Cold winters, hard labour, skinny wives, damp hovels, rain, an old age of penury - if they survive the voyage home, that is. Captain, the example you're setting is dangerous.' Roberts shrugged with exasperation. 'I can't keep control while you're doing this.'

Roberts' eloquence was impressive, but Henry was damned if he was going to be pushed. 'I'll return when I'm recovered, when I feel equal to it.' He turned away. 'It won't be long - I'm sure you'll manage. Take control: drill the marines, reduce shore leave.'

Roberts bowed his head. 'I shall have to make a record of this exchange in the ship's log, Sir. I formally request you to return to command.'

Henry frowned. 'The answer's no.'

Chapter 25

Henry handed bundles of mats and parcels of food to Atea as she stood in the canoe that was to take them to Raiatea. Breadfruit wrapped in leaves seemed like a picnic, not serious provisions for five days at sea. He passed her the water gourds and Atea settled them among the stacked parcels. It reminded him of summer trips to Steepholm as a boy. Eliza used to be so excited she'd work Prudence into a fever, chasing gulls, skipping about on the sand as his father lectured him about weather and tides. But on this trip Henry wasn't even second in command, he was a mere passenger. Atea padded the stern of the boat with rolls of barkcloth as the three men who were to sail the canoe walked up the beach.

'That one is Nunui - what you call priest. You've met him before.' She pointed to the oldest man, with palm leaves sprouting from his garland.

Henry nodded.

'The other is Herenui - you know him too - and Heimana, his son.'

The father and son wore less extravagant wreaths than the priest. Herenui looked the picture of health, with his broad chest and powerful shoulders. He was a kahuna of boat-making, who felled trees and dragged them back to the village to carve them into canoes. Henry supposed he didn't do it single-handed, but he had an air about him that suggested he might. His son had inherited his father's formidable physique. Both were taller than six feet, and Nunui wasn't much smaller. They dwarfed his sailors not only in stature, they shone with calm confidence in anticipation of this voyage; they'd grown up with the sea, swam in it, fished in it, sailed on it all their lives.

Heimana and Herenui stood nearby listening to the priest's instruction, their paddles reverently at their sides. Both of them wore barkcloth pareos about their waists, and both had intricate tattoos, Heimana over his face and one shoulder, while his father's back was decorated with a palm tree. Nunui's swirling tattoos emphasised the contours of his face; ridged blue lines fanned out across his forehead, while his cheeks were accentuated with

dark spirals. His feathery garland added to the birdlike impression. Henry wished he'd brought his paints.

Nunui talked to Heimana and his father as he nodded towards the canoe. Henry and Atea sat down in the bows, leaning on the rolled mats.

'Why are they talking for so long?' Henry asked.

'He's asking about their dreams.' Atea tilted her head. 'If we dream of *tiare* flowers in our hair before sailing, that's bad. The white tiare is the foam of the waves, going over our heads.'

'So it means drowning?'

'So we don't go.' She patted his hand. 'Were there flowers in your dreams?'

'No flowers at all.' Henry smiled at the thought of questioning his own crew about flowers in their dreams before embarking. But they were superstitious too. 'My sailors don't like it if a cat crosses their path on the way to the ship, or someone with red hair. There are many signs they're afraid of...'

'So they don't go?'

'The captain is the chief. I go on the same, sail away.'

Once their provisions were stowed and everyone settled, Herenui and Heimana pushed off and paddled across the calm waters inside the reef, easily negotiating the coral just below the surface. The canoe glided towards the opening in the reef, the sail furled while they negotiated the narrow passage.

Atea sat beside him in the stern, her ease encouraging him to relax. Henry looked back at the three bands of colour that dominated the island; the blue of the sky, the green of the mountains and the brilliant turquoise of the inner sea, letting the beauty soothe him, cautioning himself to be a good passenger. Herenui and Heimana worked in harmonious rhythm as they steered through, then they let the sail take over. Negotiating the reef was much easier in a canoe, and it took to the open sea better than he'd expected. The canoe was large enough to carry a dozen people comfortably. Palm leaves fastened to the mast fluttered above their heads, and they quickly picked up a fair pace as the sail bellied out. Tahiti's

black beaches receded, and the bulk of the Salamander diminished as they sailed towards Moorea. Henry wondered if Roberts' fury had abated. The ship looked peaceful enough, with its sails furled, sheets drying on the rigging, and a few tiny figures at the rails. The French ships lay at anchor beyond. When he returned, he'd take up his duties, fully refreshed. He turned his gaze towards Moorea, floating like a fairytale castle on the glittering sea, thin cascades shining on its steep mountains as they rose up into wreaths of cloud. Slowly the clouds flushed pink, then deepened to crimson as the sun dipped behind Moorea's peaks, throwing golden rays across the sky in farewell.

Nunui stood up in the prow, his hair streaming out beneath his fluttering headdress, impressive as a figurehead. As they sailed past Moorea, Tahiti disappeared into the gathering darkness behind them. Gazing at Atea in the failing light, Henry remembered her in his quarters when he'd painted her. She'd made him feel calm even then. With some surprise, he realised that he no longer registered the marks on her face. Her mouth was serene in repose. The lustre of her eyes shone in the gloom. When he looked at her now he focussed on her expression, her responses, not the clumsy letters cut into her skin. At Vane's house he's observed the love that motivated her impulses, whether she was sweeping up and returning dusty insects to the forest, or whether she was correcting his Tahitian, patience at the corners of her mouth. The fact that he no longer noticed her tattoo struck him as proof that he loved her. None of her people shunned her; they seemed to accept her without hesitation. She'd been punished already, yet she was choosing to face the anger and pain of her husband's people.

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The sun was high as they came through the reef at Raiatea. Hungry to see Hauata, Atea sat up and searched the shore. All she wanted was to say sorry, sorry, and to

ho'oponopono. Everyone needed the ceremony – but *ah hia*, it would be hard to look into their eyes and see the pain. Temana's people would be angry.

Henry took her hand. Maybe there was enough day left to greet everyone and begin the ceremony before night fell. Shading her eyes, Atea looked all along the steep shore, among the trees.

Nunui sailed the canoe past Nao Nao island and into Faatemu Bay, the place of Temana's people, where the mountains came down to meet the sea. Atea remembered when she first came with Temana, before Hauata was born. Then the sun was setting behind Nao Nao, the low rays lighting up Temana's face. He was happy to be home, and she rejoiced in his happiness. There was love between them in those days.

Herenui reached over and patted her foot. 'It'll be good to see Hauata.'

He knew she was afraid. Would Hauata come down to meet them, or would she hide? Temana's people would help them land the canoe. Hauata had been there with them for so long - she must be angry. Maybe she was full of hatred. As the canoe drew closer to the shore, Atea sat searching and searching. At last she saw people, coming down through the shade of coconut trees. There were men and women. Was one of them smaller?

They were too far away. She wished Herenui and Heimana would paddle faster. As they drew closer, the people on shore waved them in towards the best place to land. The smaller one didn't wave; one of the women was standing close to her, holding her. Was it Hauata? Was something wrong with her?

As they got closer Atea was disappointed that the small one was Temana's grandmother, Nanihi. She was the only old one left from the sicknesses. Where was Hauata? Perhaps she'd gone away to another village so she wouldn't have to see her hated mother. As they landed, Atea jumped over the side of the canoe and splashed towards the people gathered on the beach. Better not to wait. Better to open herself to them. Until she'd greeted them all she couldn't ask about Hauata. They were all Temana's people, and each deserved her careful attention.

Taking a deep breath, she shook out her damp *pareo*, and went to Nanihi first. Temana's cousins gathered around, exclaiming at her tattoo, curious and shocked. Nanihi held onto Atea's hands.

'I'm glad you've come.'

Atea felt tears rising up, touched that Nanihi was so generous.

'What are these marks?' Nanihi frowned as she touched Atea's face.

'It was Vetea, but the Oui-ouis made him do it. It was punishment for Temana's death.'

'*Ah hia.*' Her dry hand touched Atea's cheeks.

'It's a word. The popa'a do it to remember things. MURDERER, it says. Maybe they think I can forget.'

'Ah hia. Vetea must have been ashamed. His tattoos are always beautiful.'

Vetea had made Temana's ray tattoo. Atea bowed her head. Nanihi knew what it was to be marked; her face and arms were dotted all over with scars – she'd lived through the sicknesses. She understood what it meant, that they'd taken her beauty. Nanihi was young when she got the itching spots, but when she went out of her body to die, she'd floated above the huts and seen the children left all alone, so she returned, no matter how ugly she'd be.

'The Oui-ouis wanted to kill me - Vetea did it to help. The priests wanted a tattoo instead.'

'Does it help them to see your face like this?' Nanihi frowned. 'You say sorry to Temana every day, I know you do.'

'*Maururu.*' Atea's throat squeezed.

Nanihi sighed. 'We knew him. Temana had many angers in him. She looked into Atea's eyes. 'Why didn't you leave? Hauata says she asked you to come.'

'I thought he was – confused by the *popa'a*... I thought if I showed him my love –'

Nanihi put her hand on Atea's arm. 'We won't talk of this now. Come.'

As they turned to join the others, Atea couldn't help asking. 'Where is she?'

‘Hauata?’ Nanihi smiled and wrinkled her nose. ‘Probably making herself more beautiful. Don’t worry, she’ll come. Now, who is this?’

Henry was introduced. He stood among Temana’s people as they touched his buttons, the braid on his sleeves, the slip of his hair. No one was surprised to see him – news travelled fast; they already knew who he was.

As they climbed the forest path carrying all the presents, there was none of the usual laughter. Atea was glad Henry was behind her, walking silently with Heimana and Herenui. Although Nanihi had greeted her kindly, she could feel the anger around her, hot in the air. It made her legs shaky. She bowed her head. She’d come to make ho’oponopono with them – to make good, to make good.

Atea searched through the trees head, thinking she heard footfalls thumping. Was it someone came running down the path? A girl. Yes, it was her! Hauata’s hair streamed out behind her, while her feet kicked up dust. Glimpses of her came and went as she ran down between the trees. The strength of her running surprised Atea; she’d grown stronger. As she came towards them, her mouth made the shape that meant she might cry, and Atea was filled with shame. Afraid, she walked towards her daughter. She didn’t dare to hold out her hands. She couldn’t smile.

Another turn in the path and Hauata was with them. As soon as she saw her mother, she stopped. Atea stood still. In silence, the others walked past, even Henry and Herenui, and last of all Nunui and Nanihi, leaving them alone. Hauata gazed back at her mother without smiling. How tall she was! Hardly able to breathe, Atea stepped towards her. Hauata’s chest was heaving, her forehead damp with sweat, hair sticking to her temples as it used to when she was a small hot baby. Her eyes were so sad they made Atea’s stomach hurt. Her eyelashes were wet. There was no need for her to make herself more beautiful. It wouldn’t be possible.

‘Hauata! *Ah hia!* I missed you -’

Hauata drew back. It was a small movement, one step, but it twisted in Atea’s belly.

‘What’s that – on your face?’ Hauata looked scared.

Atea's hands went to her cheeks. 'They punished me – the popa'a - because of what I did –' She swallowed her heart back down. Hauata's face was so full of pain. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'Maururu. If I could make your father live again, I would. I'm sorry for what I did.'

'You look – not like my mother...'

'I know.' Atea moved a small step towards her, the smallest shuffle. And Hauata took another step back. 'You're different too. You're taller – even more beautiful...' She wanted to weep at the distrust on Hauata's face.

Nanihi turned and called to them. Atea ached to put her arms around her daughter, but she couldn't even step closer. Perhaps Hauata would never want to be touched by her again. She took a deep breath.

'Come, let's do ho'opono'ono for your father –'

She waited for Hauata to move. Slowly, she turned back towards the village. As if following a powerful chief, Atea walked a few steps behind. Together, they followed the others up to the marae. At least they could walk on the same path. She was grateful for that.

They went through the trees, past the old huts rotting into the ground. Most of Temana's people had died. When they reached the village, they stopped outside Nanihi's hut to eat and give the gifts of mats and barkcloth. There was none of the usual chatter of arrival; Atea sat apart, her face burning, unable to eat.

Henry hung back, waiting. 'What do I do?'

'Come with us – come and sit at the marae,' Atea replied. 'Watch. Feel. There's no need to speak. We'll tell you where to sit when we get there.'

She walked ahead of him up to the marae, watching Hauata, who looked at the sandy path as she walked, not speaking to anyone. The mother marae was a wide, flat area paved with stones, high above the sea, the most powerful marae. Down below them, the sea rolled away to the horizon. Atea showed him where he could sit, away from the sea, where he wouldn't be in the way. Temana's people spread out across the marae, settling themselves. Nunui took up his position first, then the other kahunas.

Everyone was quiet. Temana's relatives sat down facing a low platform covered with fine mats. Atea stood before them, pressing her hands together, breathing into her stomach. A few sea birds called out her sorrow. With a wrench, she watched Hauata move away to stand among her father's people. Atea stood alone in front of everyone, her cheeks hot in the sun.

Nunui began. First he spoke of Temana's people, naming all who were there. Then he called Temana to come, to hear everyone speak. They all waited for Temana's spirit to come to the low platform in front. After a while Nunui spoke again, calling Temana. Atea felt a clench in the stomach as his spirit arrived. Everyone was quiet.

Nanihi spoke first. She greeted Temana, and began to talk, telling things she did that she was afraid could have hurt him.

‘When your father went away with the Oui-ouis you didn’t speak your sadness. I’m sorry I didn’t help you talk more – you were alone in your sadness.’

Nanihi told of rebuking Temana for interrupting the elders, for touching someone’s head. Over and over she said sorry for every slight he may have felt, for every small pain. Everyone listened. Temana when he was small, Temana as he grew older. Everyone listened and waited for their turn.

It took a long while for everyone to speak. As the relatives spoke, Atea remembered her husband in those days; how proud and beautiful he was. The sun sank lower, and out of the talking grew the shape of Temana - kind and serious, quick to anger, strong and restless. The stories reminded her how long he’d carried anger inside – long before she knew him, long before he was angry with her.

When it was Hauata’s turn Nanihi sat close beside her. Hauata stood up to speak, her hands shaking.

‘I’m sorry, my father, for hating you when you were drunk and fighting.’ Hauata told of hiding from him behind some trees. ‘I’m sorry I turned away from you.’ Tears rolled down her cheeks as she spoke.

Atea pressed her hands together and felt the tears on her cheeks. She didn’t know Hauata had hidden from him.

‘You frightened me. We were scared.’ Hauata told of him shouting and pushing her mother, kicking her. ‘I felt sick when you were angry. I didn’t want to stay with you. I’m sorry I left you.’ Hauata turned and looked at Atea. ‘And I didn’t want to leave mother with you. I’m sorry I left her. She was brave to stay. I’m sorry I left her with you.’

A sob left her chest. Tears were running down Atea’s face; she could feel them filling the popa’a marks on her cheeks. Hauata was so generous. Nanihi held her as she sat down.

Then it was her turn. Nunui asked if she was ready. She made herself stand up, feeling Temana’s people watching her, hot at her back, as she faced the platform in front of everyone. Her legs felt like jellyfish. How could she speak?

She closed her eyes to see Temana - his eyes angry, bright as paua shells.

‘For a long while you were a good husband, and I was happy to see you every day. After the Oui-ouis made the garrison, when you visited with them more and more, I was not so happy. Many things that passed between us were small, but I was wrong to stay quiet. I’m sorry I didn’t talk with you strongly then. After a while each small thing sat with others. I’m sorry I didn’t show you my anger. There were many times I wanted to speak, but I was afraid.’

He seemed to tower over her, waiting.

‘It was harder to speak to you after Hauata. I hid myself from you. You went away to drink with the Oui-ouis.’

As she spoke, she understood why other women told her to look after her own happiness. Hiding her feelings made more anger for both of them; although she thought she was helping him by being quiet and patient like a Oui-oui wife, she wasn’t helping, she was making it worse.

‘When Herenui made us pouara for our dead babies I was glad to have them, safe in our hut, honouring them and loving them.’ She took a deep breath. ‘But you took them and traded them for drink.’ There was a shifting behind her – maybe his relatives didn’t know. She paused, struggling. ‘When you took our pouara my angriness was too much.’ Tears filled her eyes as she remembered the angriness rushing through her. ‘I’m sorry I wanted to hit you.’

Tears dripped off her chin. Behind her there was weeping.

‘I’m sorry I hit you.’

There was a sound behind her like a sigh of relief.

‘Please forgive me. I’m sorry.’

Breathing. Something settled.

After a while Nunui spoke into the silence. ‘Are you ready to let Temana go?’

It was so long they’d been together. She couldn’t answer.

Hauata called out. ‘Let him go to the mountain - please, let him go

away. I don't want him to be a tupapa'u.'

She felt the old angriness, heavy and sick inside her, and turned to Nunui.

'Feel the bonds going between you, all the shining bonds love,' Nunui said. 'Cut the ties, cut them now.'

And she could feel all the glowing bonds of the love between them, from her to him and back again. Imagining spinning a silver blade above her head, she took a deep breath and sent it around and around her body, cutting through the ties as it went. The blade whirled around and around, down to her feet.

'Now gather up the ends into yourself – and let him have his back.'

She drew the cut ends back into herself, drawing their warmth in.

'Now let him float away,' Nunui said. 'Wishing him well as he goes.'

She looked towards the mountain. That was where he should be – up in the misty heights, in the place of the spirits. Wishing him well, she let him rise up, able to let him go. There was lightness instead of sorrow and guilt. He floated away.

Now she felt peaceful, relieved to be separate, clean.

Chapter 26

They slept late. As Atea woke, she pushed her face into his neck. Henry had been awake for a while, thinking about the ceremony the day before. They lay together, watching sunlight streaming through the walls, spotting and striping their skins.

‘I dreamed of my sister,’ Henry said.

‘Where was she?’

‘In the garden at Wraxall.’

He’d said the name of this before. Atea imagined fruit trees, horses and dogs and other strange animals sitting in their shade.

‘Is it beautiful?’

Henry smiled. ‘Yes.’ He stroked her hair, smoothing it over her shoulder. ‘I’ll never see her again.’ He twisted a lock of hair around his wrist, dark against his skin. ‘How are you?’ He wondered what it had been like for her in front of all those relatives. ‘Where’s Temana now? Is it all right to say his name – to talk about him?’

Atea smiled. ‘Yes. He’s on the sacred mountain. She put her hand up so her arm was patterned with shadows. ‘I’m glad you came with me. It makes me feel closer to you.’

‘You were very brave.’ Henry squeezed her. ‘During the ceremony, when all the relatives were telling stories about Temana, it made me think about Eliza too. I was thinking what I did that hurt her, when we were young.’

Atea closed her eyes and put her head on his shoulder. ‘So you were making ho’oponopono too.’

‘Near the end, when Nunui said feel the bonds of love, I did that too. It was a shock when he said cut them – I didn’t want to, but I did.’

‘And you let her float away?’

Henry nodded. ‘Something has changed.’ He picked up the edge of the pareo lying over them. He hadn’t woken with the same feelings he’d had the other mornings since. Since

he knew Eliza was dead. Now he could say it to himself, feel it. Bear it, knowing he could bear it. 'The sadness is there, but looser...' He dropped the cloth gently on the ground.

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On the way to the stream she looked into Nanihi's hut to see her daughter. Hauata was asleep, one arm flung out. She looked so young when she was asleep. Although she longed to creep in kiss her, Atea stood at the doorway, then went on her way. Hauata would take her own time.

At the stream, she let the water cool her, scooping it over her head, enjoying the shock of the cold. She rinsed her mouth and rubbed her face and body until her skin was fresh, then she climbed out onto a rock. Wrapping her pareo round her, she sat in the sun to let it warm her.

Soon there was rustling along the path, and the sound of footsteps. She was pleased to see it was Hauata, coming along with her comb and a clean pareo.

'Ia orana,' she called.

'Ia orana,' Hauata looked up as she replied, but she didn't smile.

Atea ached to hug her, but instead she stayed where she was, watching Hauata's steady way of moving as she waded into the stream and sat down. She'd always been cautious, and she'd always loved the water. Hauata welcomed the chill of the stream without a shudder, splashing her face and shoulders. Atea remembered her as a small child, playing in this same stream, laughing and squealing. Then she could pick her up and cuddle her.

Now the wariness between them hurt. Hauata kept her gaze on the water, right through to the sand and stones at the bottom of it. How long she'd been in Raiatea all alone, away from her father's rages, safe with Nanihi, but she wasn't safe from the pain of it. What was it like when she'd heard of her father's death? Hauata's shoulders looked burdened now.

When she was a child, she'd loved to be rubbed clean and patted dry in the sun. Now she wouldn't want that; all the moments for closeness were different, fewer, maybe

gone. Would she ever trust her mother again? Would she ever feel easy with her? No ceremony could bring her father back. Hauata turned her back as she squatted to wash. Even her back was changed; she'd grown taller and broader – her back was more the shape of her father's, with his wide shoulders. As Hauata stood, Atea saw that her breasts were beginning. With a pang of tenderness, she realised that soon she'd want to love a man herself.

Hauata turned, water dripping down her shoulders.

Atea called out. 'Shall I wash your hair?'

Hauata's eyes flicked towards her then back to the water. She didn't speak, but lifted one foot in the water, then the other. Then she turned round, her face serious, half in shadow.

'Yes.'

Her answer was quiet but clear. With relief, Atea released the breath she hadn't known she was holding, happy Hauata allowed this much.

Slipping off her rock, she waded in beside her daughter, toes careful on the slippery stones. It wouldn't be quick, but she'd win her back. She'd let her feel her love every day, in every small way she could find, and maybe Hauata would come back to her. It could take as long as needed; days, seasons, years. It was good to be with her again. The morning was singing all around them. Hauata gave her the comb and dipped down in the water. Perhaps she'd been becoming herself here, surrounded by her father's people. It was good for her to know them, and to hear of him from mouths other than her own.

Bright sunlight scattered over the water while the stream made comfortable lapping sounds and the nearby trees rustled. Hauata tipped her head back as Atea smoothed her hands over the heavy fall of her daughter's hair. It waved in the water like an eel, long and strong and beautiful.

*

Henry tried to talk with the chiefs in Raiatea before they left, but he quickly saw the meeting was a courtesy on their part, and a hopeless cause on his. As he looked around the meeting hut at the three chiefs willing to talk with him, he discerned resignation as they passed the cava bowl. There was no real interest in his enquiries about the French in Tahiti. Clearly, they weren't prepared to risk supporting Queen Pomare against the French – they politely pointed out the size of their own canoes compared to the 'floating islands' of the French navy. So far the French hadn't bothered them much in Raiatea. The empty huts all over the island were testament to the ravages of disease – why should they fight? Not for the first time, Henry felt the fruitlessness of his own position; if they hadn't already thought to join forces against the French they weren't likely to act on his hints. As they waved him off, he felt like one of the decorative baubles offered to islanders by his own men – tawdry, ignoble.

Chapter 28

As they sailed away from Raiatea, Atea sat with Hauata, not with him. Both had their backs to him, while Herenui leaned over the side of the boat, discussing the currents with Heimana. Henry craned forward to listen to their complex discussion of three different currents, winds and clouds. These islanders might be called primitive, but they had more confidence in their side of the puzzle than he did in his. After the ho'oponopono he felt a new respect for these people, gathering to remember and to understand – like a funeral service, but more thorough, more active. It took much, much longer... but maybe it was

worth it. Now he felt ready to return to the ship. Buttoning his jacket as the breeze cooled, he conceded to himself that spirits might exist, and perhaps a ceremony could persuade ghosts to go away, as well as resolve feelings for the living. Without a doubt, he'd felt a malevolence in Vane's hut with the coconut palm. He'd always been told there was an afterlife - and who was to say what negotiations might be possible there?

After some hours they ate fish and po'ee, then Hauata fell asleep, and Atea crawled into the bows with Henry. Gratified, he slid his arms around her. His body relaxed, as Atea kissed his cheek and rested against him. There was only the slap of the waves and her warm weight in his arms.

He lay and watched the stars come out, hundreds then thousands of tiny gaslights turned up brighter than they ever were in the skies at home. The whole sky looked lower, filled with more stars, with the grand swathe of the Milky Way more obvious, crowded with light. It reminded him of sitting outside with Grace in the black and white landscape of night, learning the constellations together, gazing at a very different sky. He gazed down at Atea's face in the starlight. What he'd felt for Grace must have been infatuation. He'd thought it was love, but at eighteen he hadn't known what love could be. Grace had been shy, as inexperienced as he was, while Atea was open to him, steady in herself in a way Grace never was. This love was more mature, and more humble.

Going back to the ship would mean leaving her, and eventually, whatever happened with the French, he'd be sailing back to England. He stroked her hair, determined not to relinquish her. She could come back with him; but would she want to? Months, years – a life together. Other islanders had travelled, had become the darlings of society, presented at Court - hadn't Reynolds painted Omai, the Tahitian 'prince'? Atea wouldn't want such a fuss – but they could live quietly in the country, a modest house, a garden. His mother wouldn't approve, but she'd sent away the only other woman he'd loved, and he'd not allow that again. He thought of all the things he could show her; the ports on the journey back, dresses he could buy –he could teach her to read en route. She'd see camels, monkeys,

peacocks... or perhaps she'd prefer squirrels, voles, butterflies... Snow! She'd never seen snow... Happily pondering all the wonders he could show her, he drifted into sleep.

From time to time he woke as they sailed through the night. The canoe seemed to shrink as the vastness of the ocean rolled around them. On land, a native canoe might look sturdy, but dipping up and down on the huge swells of the Pacific, their boat felt as lightweight as a coconut husk. Atea slumbered, resting her head on his shoulder. Hauata looked comfortable curled up at their feet. From time to time, Nunui splashed himself with sea water, his jaw jutting out as he stood tall and shivering in the prow.

As Henry dozed, he dreamt of a game he used to play with Eliza and Prudence. They scraped a trench in the dry leaves at the base of the church wall, making a large dip. He and Eliza lay down together in the hollow, his coat around them as Prue pushed leaves back over them, covering them up, even their faces. The damp scent of the soil filled his nostrils. Prue's hands fluttered against the sky as she scattered leaves, giggling, blue sky behind her. He and Eliza lay side by side, safe in their burial place. It felt like relief. Leaves drifted over their faces. Prue was happy to bury them – the annoying, older twins - and he didn't mind. From the nearby yews, a chaffinch was singing. Yet the singing was odd, arranged in long, imploring phrases. As if pulled upwards by the song, Henry drifted out of his slumber, waking with his neck bent against the side of the canoe.

But the song of the chaffinch remained in the air, chirruping phrases see-sawing up and down. Nunui was still standing in the prow, his back gleaming in the almost-dark. The twittering song was emanating from him – Henry could just make out the movement of his jaw as he chanted. Without disturbing Atea, Henry raised his head to look around. Most of the stars were obscured. There were still no islands in sight; there was nothing around them save sea. As he watched, clouds advanced across the sky, eating up the starlight. They were moving fast; a storm brewing. Uneasily, he felt the weight of it in the air. After fifteen years at sea he could almost smell it.

Nunui's incantation scribbled across the dark.

Henry looked down at Atea. She was awake, her hair a dark mass around her face. She pushed stray strands of hair off her cheek as Henry bent and whispered in her ear.

‘Why’s he singing like that?’

‘He’s asking the clouds to move.’ Atea whispered back as if she didn’t want to disturb Nunui. ‘He’s talking to them.’ She patted Henry’s chest.

‘Talking to the clouds?’ Henry refrained from saying anything disparaging. But if Roberts could see him now... ‘What? What’s he saying?’

‘I don’t understand it, but it looks like a storm, so he’s probably saying; rain is beautiful and welcome, but please, if you can, return later to rain where you wish...’

Henry controlled a snort of exasperation. ‘And where are the clouds supposed to go?’

She shrugged. ‘Where they wish. They can stay where they are, or go back the way they came...’

If Atea hadn’t looked so serious, he might have been tempted to laugh. He looked again at the scene before him. Herenui and his son were shadowy figures, awake, but their heads bent in what looked like contemplation under the bulging sail. They could have been figures depicted in some ancient frieze. Atea’s gaze was fixed on Nunui as he balanced on the rocking canoe, his body taut with effort. He looked extraordinary. The leaves in his hair waved as he intoned, his toes gripping the prow as he craned into the night, holding up his hands to the clouds as his voice rang out across the surrounding water. Shivers trailed down Henry’s spine.

In his seventeen years at sea, Henry had come to respect the indomitable power of nature. Nunui’s plea seemed heartfelt enough, but thick clouds were still advancing across towards the Southern Cross, eating up the constellations. Thunder rumbled while Nunui’s twittering flowed out all around them, spinning out into the enormous darkness. Henry felt the openness of the canoe as the wind picked up and dampness gathered in the air. They were about to be drenched and tossed about like toys. They’d be lucky to be able to hang onto the boat. Great swells shoved and slid beneath them. The eerie song eddied in the wind.

Nunui was a great bird perched on the prow, moving his head back and forth, like a chicken crooning. Was he even sane?

Shivering, Nunui bent down and splashed himself with more water.

‘Why does he do that?’ Henry whispered to Atea. ‘He’s cold already.’

‘You need to be awake - to talk to the spirits. He wants to keep chanting, to be in the special way.’

It already looked like some kind of trance. Henry remembered the sepulchral tone adopted by some vicars, the singsong of readings and sermons, but that wasn’t as otherworldly as this birdlike incantation. Nunui wasn’t even using vocabulary he’d heard before, although he’d listened to many orations since arriving. Polynesian languages were so similar that Tahitians, Hawaiians, Fijians, all islanders seemed to communicate without much trouble – but this was different.

‘What language is it?’

‘Spirit talk - for addressing spirits, or trees or insects. Only kahunas use it. They learn the prayers and songs from older kahunas.’

‘Then how do you know what he’s saying?’

‘I don’t, but I know what he’s *doing*. Shh.’ She put her hand to his lips.

Henry leaned back, closing his mouth on questions itching to be asked.

Surely they’d do better to furl the sail, lie down and cling on for dear life. The canoe was going to be tossed like a cork. Maybe if they kept bailing, lashed themselves to the benches – but with what? They’d be lucky if the canoe didn’t get turned over... Chilled, Henry contemplated Atea and Hauata. Lightning flickered inside the clouds as if someone were striking a light within. More thunder rumbled. The storm was getting closer. Why hadn’t he insisted on bringing the Salamander? He was an idiot. Pacific waves could be tall as cliffs. He should have listened to Roberts. A bad storm could be terrifying even with the bulk of the Salamander around them. In a canoe it was almost certain death.

They all sat listening to Nunui, except for Hauata, who seemed capable of sleeping through a typhoon. Perhaps it was best she wasn’t aware of their peril. Why wasn’t Atea

more worried? As he looked at her beside him, it dawned on him that he could see her face better than before. She raised her eyes to the sky, and he followed her gaze. Were there more stars? Were those clouds moving? Then he felt a breath at the nape of his neck. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

The wind had changed.

Atea stretched luxuriously while Henry scanned the sky. Yes – more stars were appearing– the bank of cloud was pulling back. Surely it was impossible – but no, there was the Southern Cross! Nunui raised up his hands and made what Henry assumed was a lengthy speech of thanks. During his oration, the breeze at Henry's nape grew stronger, and as Nunui finished he turned to face them. Atea and the oarsmen clapped - a sudden joyful racket that had them all grinning like children. Henry joined in, still barely able to believe it. Hauata woke up and rubbed her eyes.

Henry had never witnessed clouds behaving in such an extraordinary fashion. He tried to think of a sensible explanation, yet could discover none. All six of them gazed at the sky. More and more stars peeped. Could Nunui really get clouds to move? With confused and reluctant respect, he watched Nunui as he sat down and began picking his toes.

Atea shifted against Henry's shoulder.

'Ah, Henry, you have no questions?'

He stared at her. 'He told the clouds to move.'

'Yes,' she sighed, relaxing the length of her body against him. 'But he didn't tell them, he asked.'

* * *

Atea felt the change in Henry. He gazed about him with new openness. When he spoke with the other men there was more respect in his voice. It was good to lie beside him as they sailed. The sun peeped over the horizon and sent a golden path towards them. Flying fish leapt out of the water.

‘Isn’t it beautiful?’ She pulled him closer, enjoying the warmth of him. Soon the sun would be drying their eyes with its strength. Together they looked at the sparkling morning, the clean sweep of sky. Tonight they could reach Tahiti.

‘Very beautiful,’ Henry replied. He shifted his head closer, his breath warm on her cheek. ‘You know - I’ve been thinking – I’d like you to see the beautiful things at home – in London there’s a big river that goes through the city, with many different boats, and tall, stone buildings rising up on the banks where all the chiefs of England meet and - lots of things you don’t have words for...’ Atea laughed as he squeezed her to him. ‘You can listen to music, played by many, many people together in big, big meeting houses, music that will fill your ears with pleasure...’

His voice murmuring into her neck was soothing, but she couldn’t picture the things he was talking about.

‘...and there are delicious foods; fishes and meats that you’ve never tasted - fruits that don’t grow here –’ He nibbled her neck, saying popa’a words. ‘*Strawberries, blackcurrants, cherries, apples, pears, raspberries...*’

She stroked his arm, laughing. ‘You know I like good things to eat.’

‘We’ll go to the country; you can see all the animals – *cows, sheep, hedgehogs, rabbits, badgers, squirrels...*’

Of course she’d like to see, but it was all so far away. She leaned back to rest on him.

‘Is it as beautiful as our forest?’

He sighed. ‘Yes, and different – the trees are full of many more birds singing, not quiet like here - and the leaves change colour in the different seasons. When the hot season is ending the trees turn to red, and yellow, and gold, as if they’re burning. You’d like it. They shake their burning leaves at you – and when the cold comes the leaves fall down. Many hundreds of leaves dancing down, as many as the fish in the sea. Then the trees are naked, and you see their shapes...’

‘I’d like to see the women too,’ Atea smiled, imagining the women, pretty in their dresses, red, yellow and gold like the trees. ‘Do they have many colours of hair, like the men on your ships?’

Henry laughed. ‘Yes, red and brown and black and yellow hair – some curled and some straight –’

‘And the children?’ She’d like to see the popa’a children; Henry had told her that some women had many children. How could they look after so many children? All their children gathered around them like flowers in a garland.

‘Will you come?’ His arms tightened around her. ‘Will you come with me?’

Atea turned to look at the hope in his face. ‘On your ship?’ She was surprised to see he was serious.

‘Yes, so I can show you my country. So we can be together. I don’t want to leave you here. I want you to come with me.’

Atea was silent with shock. She stared at Hauata relaxing in the hull - she wouldn’t want to leave; Hauata wanted to be home, with her mother. Henry’s ship would sail away, getting smaller and smaller. She couldn’t be on his ship, leaving Hauata behind – and she didn’t want to think about him leaving – both thoughts brought tears to her eyes. She turned her face to Henry’s chest. All through her body, she didn’t want him to leave. But Hauata...

He was waiting for her answer, his eyes like bits of the blue ocean. She wanted to say yes, but she was pulled taut between the two of them. How could she take Hauata on such a journey? Hauata needed to be with her people, to mourn her father, to be with her mother.

Atea turned towards Henry again.

‘When will you go?’

As soon as she asked she saw the misery in his eyes. He thought she’d decided.

‘Maybe after one more season – we came for a year...’

Atea looked at Hauata. Only one season to be with her daughter? Only one season to be with him? But maybe she didn’t have to decide now.

‘Could Hauata come on your ship?’

Henry’s eyes lit up. ‘Yes – yes, of course.’

His happiness touched her. She looked into his face, smiling at his happiness. One season. It wasn’t long. Why did she have to decide now? She wanted to be with him; if he left without her, she’d be sad – and she’d be sad to leave Hauata. But they could wait, and after one season she could decide, Hauata could decide. She didn’t have to say now, but she had to do what she wanted; she’d learned that from being with Temana. Hauata might want to be with her own man by then. She’d be settled, more grown. How would she choose?

‘I want to come with you. But I have Hauata to care for – let us be together for now. Ask me when you’re ready to go. Hauata can decide for herself then.’

She spoke quietly, but her heart was jumping in her chest.

Chapter 29

It had been dark for some time as they approached Tahiti. Henry guessed it was around two o'clock in the morning. Stars and a waning moon were mostly hidden behind a layer of clouds, while the islands of Moorea and Tahiti grew bigger as they sailed closer, from vague lumps disturbing the horizon into two dark triangles rising from the flat plane of the ocean. Everyone in the canoe sat up, even sleepy Hauata. Henry tightened his arm around Atea. He had to return to command.

The canoe slid through the opening in the reef, easily avoiding the boulders on either side, even in the near darkness. Herenui and Nunui knew the waters around their island well. In the gloom of the harbour, the three European ships looked like small islands themselves, their masts scratching up towards the stars like dead trees. Henry peered at the Salamander – what was that odd, shaky light coming from the deck? The light was confusing; surely too big for a lantern. Was there a brazier on board? He couldn't take his eyes off the point of light, jumping upwards intermittently, then settling again. Silently, the canoe drew nearer.

'What is it?' Atea followed his gaze.

'It looks like fire.' As he spoke, a figure moved across in front of the orange glow; the shape of a man, his arms held out as if dancing. What was happening? Alarm gripped his guts. Why would they light a fire on deck? 'Herenui, please take me to my ship.' He turned to Atea. 'I have to go back now. I won't come to Vane's with you. I'll find you on shore as soon as I can.'

'Something is wrong?' Atea held his arm.

'No one makes a fire on a wooden ship.'

Herenui and Nunui lowered the sail to make the canoe less visible. They paddled towards the Salamander in silence. Henry hoped they'd be hard to spot in the darkness. At the very least, he had the advantage of surprise. If it was the kind of trouble he feared, he didn't want the canoe fired on. Why hadn't he listened to Roberts? He hissed for quiet, while

Atea made Hauata lie down in the bottom of the boat between the oarsmen and Nunui.

Henry and Atea kept low. All were alert to the sounds on deck. Singing and raised voices rang out in the darkness, travelling over the quiet lagoon. What sounded like loud declarations were followed by laughter, the rhythms of the phrases seesawing as if the speakers were drunk. Words weren't audible, but the tone supported Henry's fears.

He fumbled his boots on, cursing that he had no weapons. Atea whispered to Herenui, persuading him to lend Henry his knife - bigger than a midshipman's dirk, Herenui used it for killing and filleting fish. Henry whispered thanks as he felt the weight of it in his hand. He'd have to use it without hesitation. Courageously, Heimana offered to go with him. It was tempting to have such a fearsome companion, but Henry couldn't allow Heimana to risk his life. By the time they reached the starboard side Henry had his boots laced, jacket buttoned and Herenui's blade thrust under his belt.

They paddled towards the bows, keeping away from the stern where the fire was burning. Nunui pointed at a rope ladder, just discernable, hanging in the darkness. Henry wondered why it had been left there - perhaps some of the men had decamped, or deserted? If there was a full blown mutiny aboard, they might have put the officers in a boat and sent them off, like Captain Bligh and his officers... A mutiny! If that's what it was, the situation was desperate.

Atea held onto him. He took her face in his hands.

'Don't come to the ship. Promise me you won't come. Not tomorrow, or the next day. Not any day. It might be dangerous for you - keep away.'

Whatever happened to him, he didn't want her confronting an angry rabble. She pressed her face into his chest. 'I'll wait.'

'I'll come to you as soon as I can, I promise. Stay on shore with Hauata.'

He kissed her upturned face.

Heimana caught hold of the swinging rope ladder, and squeezed Henry's shoulder in a gesture of farewell. Henry covered his mouth with his hand to indicate silence, and climbed onto the ladder. For a moment he waited, getting used to the ladder swinging, not

wanting it to knock noisily against the side, then he waved them away. As the canoe slid into the darkness, he climbed slowly and cautiously upwards, waiting for it to be gone.

Raucous voices ebbed and flowed above him, apparently unaware of the canoe. Listening intently, Henry prayed that they were thoroughly drunk - and easier to overcome. How long had this been going on? Days? Hours? If the nearby French captains hadn't noticed anything amiss, maybe just tonight. They probably wouldn't risk their own men trying to intervene anyway. He could hear fire crackling, smell the smoke. If the fire burned through the deck and fell into the heart of the ship, the whole vessel could go up in flames. As he climbed carefully, hand over hand, feeling his way, he strained to hear the voices. Was that Turnbull?

It sounded as if perhaps a dozen or more men were gathered on the top deck - too many for him to tackle alone, whether drunk or not. Perhaps he should have gone to shore and returned with a party of gendarmes, but the whole ship could be ablaze by then. The knife pressed against his hip, secure under his belt. He'd use it if he had to. His hands were damp on the rungs. As he climbed higher, the ladder swung less, and he stopped, searching over his shoulder for the canoe. It was nowhere to be seen; they must be safe.

He was just below the gun deck. Open gun-ports were ranged along the length of the ship just above his head, lit from the inside. He could smell the oil of the lamps. The ladder hung to the side of one of these holes, so Henry eased upwards, hoping the dark would provide cover, keeping his face to the side of the gun-port. He stopped, waiting for the ladder to be still, then, holding his breath, slowly leaned towards the gun-port until he could see in. A few lanterns were burning, but the men appeared to be asleep, lying on the floor between the rows of the cannon, their heads and arms lolling among scattered platters, cards and tankards. It was a scene of exhausted chaos. The chickens had escaped; several were wandering about, pecking at the food on the platters. Two hens were comfortably asleep side by side on top of a nearby cannon.

Clearly there had been carousing. It was a mess, but he could see no casualties, no blood. About thirty feet away, a small group on the far side of the gundeck looked as if they

were still playing cards, although some of them were slumped, perhaps dozing where they sat. His view was partially obscured by the pillars and hatchway. Usually all the men but the night watch would be in their hammocks by ten. No officers were in evidence. Where were they? Had they been put in irons? His stomach clenched. Killed?

Not far from the gun port, he spotted a seaman's cutlass among some empty cups. Maybe he could reach it if he could lean in far enough. There was no lantern alight nearby, so he was in darkness, and the seamen on the other side of the deck seemed preoccupied with their game. If he moved very slowly... Henry swapped hands on the ladder, hanging off one side of it so he could stretch through the gun-port, reaching for the knife, all the while keeping an eye on the card players. As his fingertips eased towards it, the ladder swung slightly back against his shifting weight, so he wriggled his belly further through the hole until he just managed to get hold of the tip. Gripping the blade tight, he slid back, stowing the cutlass in his belt alongside Herenui's fishing knife. Two knives against how many?

He moved on up the ladder, careful not to let it knock against the side, controlling his breathing, keenly aware of every sound. As he came up towards the bowsprit, the stench of the heads hit him. Hand over hand, he eased past, looking up towards the forecastle. If he could get to where the shrouds from the foremast came over the side, perhaps he could climb onto deck over the rails there, obscured by the rigging. As he came level with the gun-ports on the top deck, he peered through, and drew back in shock. Someone was leaning on the cannon right by the gun-port, only a few feet away.

He gripped the ladder. It was a shoulder he'd glimpsed, from behind. The man couldn't see him, and although the light was dim, the shape of his shoulder was sharp – he must be wearing a jacket, which meant he was likely to be a marine, or an officer – unless his officers uniforms had been appropriated. He peered through again. Those ears, outlined against the glow from the fire; Calkin? He was sitting awkwardly, his head turned towards the group at the other end of the ship, where the flames burned on the quarterdeck. Too upright to be asleep, the position of his arms behind him made it likely he was tied - to the cannon? Gingerly, Henry raised himself up to the rails. Men were sitting at intervals all

along the rails around the forecastle, probably similarly tied, some slumped and some upright, although their identities were hard to make out. But they were probably officers - or those who'd resisted. Henry hoped they were all alive.

He couldn't see too well in the darkness; maybe thirty men tied to the rails, he estimated, unharmed enough to require restraint. Over on the quarterdeck, at the other end of the ship, perhaps forty more were gathered around the flicker of flames, their voices loud with drink. A few were staggering about, perhaps attempting a jig. They looked as if they'd been in their cups for some hours at least. Forty, or maybe fifty of them, some reclining, some perhaps asleep. Sometimes drunk men can fight like demons, he thought, but too far in their cups and they'd be useless. Did they have weapons? He couldn't see any guns, and given their drunkenness they might not be able to manage loading; powder and shot required some dexterity. They might have bayonets fitted, though - and they'd have their cutlasses without a doubt. If they'd overwhelmed the marines and officers they'd be likely to have their swords, guns and pistols. The odds were miserable, but he had to try; there was no other way.

Was it definitely Calkin? Henry peered at the shape of his head. Yes, not just the ears, but the straight hair sticking out around them. Maybe it was getting lighter - dawn coming - or maybe the fire light made the silhouette clearer. Surely there was no-one else with ears so outward bound? He'd be prepared to bet on it - anyway, there wasn't much choice. Hooking his arm around the rails, he whispered through the gun-port. '*Calkin!*'

The head turned sharply. Yes. Henry had a surge of hope. Calkin's small nose and chin.

'Stay still!'

The figure straightened, and faced forward again. '*Who's that?*'

Confident of Calkin's loyalty, Henry replied. 'Your Captain. Don't turn round.'

'Thank God, Sir.'

Calkin's audible relief made Henry feel their precariousness even more keenly. He was expected to save them. How could he?

Men were shifting all along the rails. The nearby shrouds quivered.

‘Shhh! Stay still!’ He leaned forward so he could whisper as quietly as possible to the midshipman. ‘How many are tied up here?’

‘At least thirty, Sir. More down below - the Purser and First Lieutenant, some of the Lieutenants and marines – and the chaplain...’

‘Where are they being held?’

‘In your quarters, I think, Sir.’

‘Who’s up here?’

‘Most of the Warrant Officers, some of the Petty Officers, us Midshipmen - more marines -’

‘Are you tied or chained?’

‘Tied, Sir, with rope. Too damn tight.’

Henry leaned through the gun-port, pushing his upper body into the gap. As his feet left the ladder it rattled against the side – he froze, but the men around the fire took no notice, so he edged himself forward alongside the cannon, which hid him from the carousing crew. Crawling forward on his elbows, he could see about two dozen figures tied to the rails and the rigging around the forecastle. Their faces gleamed in the darkness, turned towards him as he wriggled to Calkin and felt for the ropes. He touched Calkin’s hands, clammy and cold.

‘Keep still,’ he whispered as he felt for the knots. All the men on the rails were stirring. ‘Shhh - Turn your face away -’ he hissed to the next man along. ‘You’ll be next.’

Was it Lyons, the ship’s surgeon? Calkin was lashed fast to the cannon, but Herenui’s knife worked through the ropes. As he sawed, Henry whispered to Calkin.

‘Wait until all officers are free, then we’ll creep towards those brigands together. Tell the others: when I give the sign, get to the fire, and grab them. Use a burning brand if you can’t get a weapon. We’re unarmed, but they’re drunk. Fire can be our weapon, if nothing else.’

Calkin nodded. ‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Capture rather than kill. Make sure you tell them that.’ They needed crew for the journey back, at least, Henry thought grimly. ‘You go towards starboard - cut them free. Creep, don’t rush.’ He pulled the seaman’s cutlass from his belt and gave it to Calkin. ‘Wait for my command - unless they spot us.’ He held Calkin’s shoulder; feeling him trembling - either from cold or terror. ‘Tell each man as you cut him free - three things; capture - get their weapons - use the fire, and be quiet about it. We don’t want them to alert the others below. Understand?’ He let go. ‘Tell me.’

‘Capture, get weapons, use fire – quiet.’

‘Good.’ He squeezed Calkin’s shoulder. ‘That way.’ He pointed between the cannon and the rails. ‘Stay low. Good luck.’

Calkin nodded, and began to crawl along the deck towards the men lashed to the shrouds. Henry wriggled towards the bowsprit on his elbows, glancing back over his shoulder towards the fire. How long would it take to burn through the deck? How long had it been burning? How long before a sail or the rigging caught? Maybe they didn’t care about destroying the ship – perhaps they didn’t want to go home. Five men were tied up at the bow. The nearest was Lyons, with Midshipman Percy was beside him. Neale, the marines’ officer, had a gash over his eyebrow dark with blood, but he looked alert. As Henry cut them free, he whispered the instructions he’d given Calkin. They listened intently as they rubbed their wrists. The light from the fire made tiny, devilish points in their eyes.

‘Where are the rest; the officers - marines?’

Lyons replied. ‘Turnbull told Thwaite to lock them in your quarters, Sir.’

So Calkin was right.

Henry thought Lyons a brave man - anyone who could saw a man’s leg off had to have strong nerves. ‘When we charge them, you and Percy get hold of a couple of guns, then go to my quarters and try your damndest to get them out. Kick the door through - as you see fit. If there are guards they’ll hear the commotion - pretend your guns are loaded if you must. Whatever you need to do. Lyons?’

‘Yes, Sir.’

Henry continued around the forecastle. He wanted his officers to see him and hear his plan, such as it was, from his lips. *'They're drunk. A burning branch in the face is as fearsome as a bayonet.'* He tried to be encouraging. As he went, he could make out Calkin crawling towards the waist of the deck, others behind him. Wait, man, wait, he thought, sliding as quickly as he could towards the men lashed to the larboard cannon. Quelling their greetings and repeating his instructions, he cut their bonds. The men at the fire seemed oblivious - it sounded as if some aimiable quarrel was developing as they shouted at each other, laughing.

Looking over to Calkin, Henry motioned to the thirty-odd freed men to move forward. All able-bodied. Good. Creeping on his front, he moved forward, his eyes on the seamen gathered around the fire. Smoke blew across the deck towards them, providing some cover. He hoped no-one would cough. Cautiously, officers and marines elbowed their way along both sides of the deck, curling around coils of rope, sliding along the two gangways at the waist, pausing to listen to the slurred voices around the fire. Henry noticed two boats were gone. So some had gone ashore - or some officers - how many mutineers were left on board? As they came around the waist of the ship, he raised his hand to the others. Everyone stopped.

His heart was banging.

Turning so he could be seen by the men on their bellies behind him, Henry put his hand over his mouth: quiet. The light from the fire made his officers' faces visible. They looked grim. The longer they had to surprise the seamen, the better. He couldn't believe that they hadn't been spotted yet. Some of the mutineers looked as if they'd collapsed, perhaps asleep, slumped against each other. Three were staggering about in a sorry attempt at a jig. The few others left awake were throwing out gobbets of talk in the sporadic way of drunks. He recognised Turnbull and Thwaite - they appeared to be the leaders, boasting, declarative. Both of them were aggressive older men, muscular from years of hard labour.

Henry was trained to stand on deck and give orders, overseeing. He'd never imagined having to attack his own crew - all of them were known to him, not faceless

enemies. How could he stab a man who'd served him? The last time he'd fought was in the boxing ring at school - apart from the odd tussle when he was a midshipman. Hand to hand struggles were more familiar to the seamen. He'd never had to kill a man with his own hands, yet now he and Calkin had the only knives. In the glow from the fire he could see his officers looking up at him as they lay flat on the deck. It was possible - at least to get the drunk men around the fire pinned down, but the numbers below were another matter. The blood on Neale's forehead shone. Henry gripped Herenui's knife. He lifted his hand, making sure they were watching, then he pointed at the fire.

Now. He launched himself forward, running as quietly as he could hunched over for fear of shot. It felt unfair not to be shouting 'Charge!' but he quelled that thought. These men were destroying his ship. The penalty for mutiny was death. As they ran the thirty feet towards the fire Henry was aware of Calkin and the doctor on his left, Percy and Neale on his right. Boots thumped on the boards. The men around the fire turned and understood what was happening and some tried to get to their feet, but Henry's men were on them. The drunken seamen were dazed as bears. They'd no time to load their guns, but some were still grabbing for them.

A big man was in front of him, a familiar shape against the flames, straightening up, gun in hand. He steadied himself, then swung the butt of his gun up into Henry's gut. Don't hesitate, Henry told himself. As he bent forward with the force of the blow he pushed his knife in, up under the ribs. Was that far enough to wound, without killing him? The sailor grunted but didn't stop. He lifted his head as if he'd remembered something, withdrew his gun then slammed it into Henry's side. Herenui's knife ground against ribs as the man moved. Winded, Henry felt as if he and this man were in a pocket of silence, performing a strange dance. Someone was swearing nearby. The gun butt arced to his side, then slammed into his head. Was this seaman unstoppable? Henry thrust Herenui's knife in again, higher. Again it scraped on ribs. He'd never so much as killed an animal. The seaman slumped.

Coleman; that was his name. A big body making a bubbling noise as it sagged towards him. Breath that smelt of rum. The knife grated as Coleman collapsed forward - as

if he wanted to embrace it. Pulling the knife out and twisting out of his way, Henry grabbed Coleman's gun as he fell into the edge of the fire, ash puffing pale around him. Neale was beside him, struggling on the deck, half underneath a man with a tarred pigtail. Thornton? Henry gripped his knife between his teeth and slammed the gun butt into Neale's assailant, twice, hard into his neck. The seaman let go, his hands falling to the deck. Neale pushed him off. Henry pressed the gun into Neale's hands as he staggered to his feet.

On his left, the three men who'd been dancing were flailing at Calkin and two marines. Calkin's knife arm struck. On the other side of the fire, Midshipmen Cecil and Charles had brands from the fire and were thrusting the burning ends at Thwaite and Turnbull. Marines to his right were already sitting on those who'd been asleep, lashing them with the rope they'd been tied with themselves. Henry noted their forethought, glad they'd thought of it. A stream of blasphemy gurgled out of the captured drunks, but they weren't putting up much of a fight. Henry kicked their guns away as one of them reached out - then he saw Midshipman Charles go down, yelping. A mutineer stood over him with a bayonet. Henry leapt past the fire, thrusting his knife against the back of the seaman's throat.

'Surrender and you'll live.' Henry pressed the point of Herenui's knife into the hard muscle of his neck. The man flinched, staring at Henry, astonished. 'Drop your weapon,' Henry barked. And he did. 'Kneel.'

The seaman dropped to the deck. A marine swiftly moved in to tie him up while Henry stood over him, knife still pressed against flesh.

Turnbull and Thwaite were fighting with marines to his left. The sleepers were tied, a few more were fighting officers, and several were tussling, up against the guard rails while sparks flew and bounced all around them - Henry saw Cecil push his brand into someone's face. The stink of burning hair. Percy grabbed a gun from the ground, and held the bayonet to a mutineer's side as he turned towards Lyons. Percy and the doctor were both brandishing reclaimed bayonets.

'Go down!' Henry shouted, pointing below. 'Get the others!'

They ran to the hatchway. Henry hoped they'd make it before the whole ship was roused and armed. He leapt towards Thwaite and Turnbull, the most obvious ringleaders.

'Surrender! Surrender now!' He shouted.

Turnbull was backing away from Midshipman Cecil's fiery brand, trapped between the fire and the men fighting with burning branches. There was barely any room on the quarterdeck that wasn't fire or bodies. Turnbull ducked, kicked and grabbed at Cecil's brand as Henry got the point of his blade into Turnbull's side.

'Surrender, or you'll die,' Henry yelled.

Turnbull stiffened as if he'd been bitten. Stuck between the blade and the brand, he put his arms up.

'Stop,' he brayed.

Henry kept his knife pressed hard as Turnbull shouted. Frenzy seemed to agitate in the air, with the scuffling and swiping brands, sparks flying through smoke.

Over at the rails, seaman Williams shouted 'I won't - I won't go back!'

Henry recognised his Welsh accent. He saw the branch pushed into William's shirtfront, flames obscuring his face as he was forced against the rail. Yelling as his shirt caught fire, Williams dropped his bayonet to beat at his chest, but another lunge from the burning branch forced him to lean back further - sending him toppling, screaming, over the rails into the sea below. Henry shouted into the momentary, shocked silence.

'We have you, Turnbull! All of you - give yourselves up!'

Turnbull looked around at the bodies, tied and injured, and the two men left fighting. Henry pushed his knife against Turnbull's muscular back. A dark patch was growing in his shirt. Cecil advanced with his brand, holding the flames close to Turnbull's chest. Henry could taste singed hair.

'You won't get another chance,' Henry warned.

Turnbull threw down his weapon. 'I surrender -'

Straightaway the other seaman at the rail dropped his gun. Neale pulled his bayonet out of a broad chest with a sound that Henry felt in his teeth. His victim slumped to the deck.

The few remaining seamen put their hands up, shouting 'We surrender!' Once their leader gave in, Henry thought, they caved surprisingly fast.

'Rope,' Henry barked. 'Check for knives and tie them up.'

He couldn't go down until these men were secured. He counted his officers. A dozen marines held down the surrendered men, while others held bayonets to their chests. Where was the powder and shot? He ordered Neale and Cecil to secure the weapons. Charles had stopped moaning - maybe unconscious, maybe dead. Calkin limped towards Henry, his leg dark with blood; he'd been bayoneted. He slumped to the deck nearby, clinging to his gun. Henry spotted powder horns and shot on the deck nearby, and pointed them out to Neale.

As his officers tied up the seamen, Henry stripped the shirt from Coleman's body and bound Calkin's leg as tightly as he could. He noticed something gritty underfoot - sand? There was a leather bucket lying nearby. Perhaps they'd put sand from the firebuckets under the fire to protect the deck? Anyway, he couldn't deal with that now. He was surprised to be having such thoughts when his hands were wet with blood from Calkin's wound. His mind was busy as he wiped his hands on his breeches. Neale had gathered the powder and shot, plus all the guns and cutlasses from the mutineers into a pile beside Calkin. 'You stay here on guard -' Henry dropped a powder horn into Calkin's lap. 'Load them all; shoot if you have to. We'll secure the rest of the ship.' He looked to the officers tying the rest of their prisoners to the shrouds. Could he spare anyone to stay with Calkin?

Cecil was securing men to the rigging, but Neale was swaying like a sapling, hanging onto the shrouds. He wouldn't be much use anyway. It was getting lighter. Henry could see the crusted wound over Neale's eye, the effort he was making just to remain standing.

'You, Neale - stay here with Calkin - try to put the fire out. Throw as much as you can overboard, then get water.' Kicking the bucket towards Neale, he glanced around. Calkin was pale, but conscious. 'Calkin - stay awake - load the guns.' With Neale and Calkin injured, they were down to three dozen men, but at least they all had bayonets.

‘Hurry!’ He said to the others, ‘Load your weapons, then down the hatch. As fast and quiet as you can.’

He led the way, with the marines close behind. When he’d climbed up the rope ladder earlier, there’d been those few men awake playing cards on the gun deck; if they were still awake they must have heard, even though the struggle hadn’t been that noisy, no more than a brawl. Maybe they’d been alerted, maybe not. As he came down the hatchway, the deck looked deserted except for two men on guard by the screens to his quarters. Bracing himself against the steps, he aimed at the nearest. Atkin, a good rigger, hard drinker.

‘Atkin! Your leaders are overcome. Give in and save your own lives - release those prisoners now, or we’ll shoot!’

Both guards gripped their weapons, looking at their captain and his flanking officers as if dazed. Close beside Henry, a marine fired. The discharge felt as if it exploded in Henry’s head. Atkin looked simply surprised as he was hit. He staggered as his hand went up to his ear. It was no longer there.

‘Hold your fire.’

Atkin’s bayonet clattered to his feet. As the other guard threw his forward, Henry spotted Lyons’ boots sticking out behind the cannon nearest to his quarters. He wore distinctive, expensive boots. The angle of them made him fear Lyons was dead. Midshipman Percy, who he’d sent with Lyons, was nowhere to be seen. The screens to his quarters were closed. As Henry glanced down the length of the ship towards the other end of the empty deck, a volley of shots rang out. A marine went down behind him. So they were hiding down there.

Henry ducked behind the cannon, kneeling beside the doctor’s body. He and his officers were sitting ducks here, he thought. The firing stopped - his crew were taught that one man should always hold his fire, to cover the reload. He wondered if they’d remembered. In the pause, without any order, a lone marine - Langford - rashly set off down the gun deck, ducking behind the capstan and the pillars. Henry couldn’t stop him, but it was a diversion worth using. Langford zigzagged bravely, if foolishly, down the deck.

‘Break down the screens,’ Henry ordered.

Without hesitation, Marine Stork ran at the partition, smashing his shoulder into the wood as another shot rang out. Someone cried out - Langford - he was hit, down, close to the main hatchway. So they had remembered their training. Langford was clutching his knee, crawling behind the hatchway. Two more marines ran at the screens alongside Stork. The force of the three of them broke through. Henry was close behind them as they burst into his quarters, followed by the others carrying the spare arms. Henry’s desk was upended, and his officers were braced behind it. They were bloodied and dishevelled, but looked reasonably intact. Roberts’ eye was swollen and closed, a massive bruise developing on his forehead. The room was a mess, papers on the floor, his paintings torn down.

‘Captain!’ Roberts cried out.

Henry nodded. ‘Good to see you all. Take arms – all those who are capable. Stork, Cecil - cover the door. We don’t want to get cornered.’ Quickly, his men were handing out guns, powder and shot, and the captured officers began loading as soon as the guns were in their hands. ‘We’ve got the ringleaders - Turnbull and Thwaite - tied up above. Have some absconded?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Roberts answered. ‘At least twenty went ashore - took two boats.’

‘How many left on the mess deck?’

‘Last we saw of it, most of them were down there, Sir. They’d breached the stores but not the gun room - more interested in the rum -’

‘Thank God.’ Deciding to take the quickest men, he turned to Old Groan, the Purser. ‘Even if they were asleep, it’s likely they’re awake now. You, Roberts and you two deal with the men on this deck.’ He nodded at two of the marines. ‘Don’t join us on the mess deck until you’ve got them secured, lashed to the cannon. Didn’t sound like too many. Watch out for more coming up the hatches.’ He turned to the other officers and marines. ‘We’ll go down. Let me speak first; fire *only* if they fire on us. They’ve got to have a chance to surrender - better for us all.’

Armed and staying close together, they made their way down to the mess deck. A scene of somnolent disarray lay before them. Some men were awake, or waking up, knives in their hands, grubbing about for powder or shot to load their guns; inept, clumsy, fuddled. Henry realised the rum was his best friend. Plenty of men still appeared unconscious; on the floor, sprawled across tables, snoring in the hammocks slung above the tables. The struggles on the top deck must have been muffled two decks below. In the dim light from the few lanterns, he could make out no more than thirty or forty attempting to arm themselves among the strewn bodies, platters of food, bottles and tankards. Judging from the bottles, they'd got to the wine and porter too. Surrounded by a thicket of guns, Henry stepped back, up onto the steps and spoke into the gloom. He hoped the dim light would help - it might be unclear to the men how many men were with him.

'Give yourselves up! Your captain is back on board and you all know the penalty for mutiny. If you fire now, it'll be your own death sentence!'

There were some well-timed shots above them on the gun deck; Roberts and Old Groan, he hoped, quelling the few up there. Or being quelled. But he had to bluff it out. He squared his shoulders.

'We have more officers above, and your ringleaders are captured.'

He paused. The seamen were still loading their weapons; he could hear the slide of metal, the tapping of the powder horn. Although the sentence for mutiny was death, he couldn't kill them all. He needed a crew to sail home.

'I'm offering you the chance to live. I don't want any more bloodshed, but we'll shoot if we have to. Surrender now and you'll live - any further resistance and we'll open fire.' He let the threat sink in, hoping they were too fuddled to think the numbers through. He had about two dozen officers with him, while the remaining uninjured crew was probably closer to two hundred. But for all they knew, he could have French soldiers on board as reinforcements.

'Lay down your arms!' He bellowed, his eyes ranging the deck, holding the ensuing silence between them as if he were confident, as if he had three hundred men at his back. All

of these men were known to him, by name, by behaviour, by long proximity. Their faces were indistinct in the gloom. They were weighing it up. If he didn't get control, the ship would be ruined. He and his officers could be killed, or set adrift like Bligh. His responsibility rang through his body clear as a tolling bell. He put it simply.

'I'm your Captain - I give you my word. Surrender and we won't shoot!'

A seaman standing by the nearest table - Gregory; long haired, rangy but strong as tarred rope - slowly laid his cutlass down among the debris. Beside him, Seaman Clements, red eyed, followed suit. Henry realised he was holding his breath again. He exhaled, but it wasn't over yet.

'Stand here.' He pointed his bayonet to a spot beside the guns. The two seamen approached, and turned to face their fellows. Their shoulders curled forwards as if they expected a beating, while two marines grabbed their arms to lash them together. 'I repeat,' Henry barked, 'join us and I swear you'll live.'

He scanned the deck. The hull creaked in the silence.

'This is the only chance you have.'

'I'm with you, Sir - ' Another seaman was coming forward. 'And I didn't like what they done to your dog, Sir.'

Favour? Henry prickled with concern. There'd been no sign of her, but of course she'd hide in a such a fracas - and this was not the time for further questions. Several others were coming forward.

'Put your guns there.' Henry pointed to the closest table. 'And any other weapons.'

More were coming. His officers shuffled round the surrendering men in a wide arc. One by one, men crawled out from behind trestles and tables. One by one, they gave up their arms.

Chapter 30

Atea was pounding coconut while Hauata sat in the shade and watched. She'd been down to the beach that morning, to see the ship. A breath of smoke hung above the masts. Was it from the fire? Was he safe? Their guns made smoke, but not so much you could see it so far away. It was quiet; no cannon, but they had heard gunfire last night. She gazed out to sea for a long while as the small waves cooled her ankles.

She'd found out from Miri that some of his men had come ashore and gone to hide in the forest. A few women had gone with them. No soldiers had been sent to fetch them back, although that was what usually happened. Was he hurt – why didn't he send word to her?

He'd told her not to go there, and she'd promised she wouldn't. Although she was longing to paddle a canoe out and see for herself, she stayed by Hauata and pounded coconut. Her arms had to do something, but soon there'd be enough to feed everyone in Pape'ete. It was almost midday. Herenui had been fishing in his canoe, and he said it looked quiet on the Salamander. Perhaps Henry would come today. Hauata was home, and she wanted to celebrate, but her stomach was tight with fear for Henry.

Everyone was making a feast to welcome Hauata. It was good to have something to do, and arrowroot pounded with coconut was one of Hauata's favourite dishes. It was like before, when Temana went out fishing and she and Hauata spent their days together. As she pounded to make the coco flesh smooth, Atea watched Hauata look out beyond the reef. It was good to have her back. She was older, more like a woman; her shoulders had her self sitting in them. No-one would be bringing fish, but no-one would be bringing shouting and anger either.

Hauata went in and fetched a mat. She rolled it out beside her mother and sat down on one side of it, leaving a space, flicking away a few grains of sand so it was clear. Pleasure welled up in Atea as she stopped pounding and shifted over onto the mat. It was the first one they'd woven together, frayed around the edges now, with a pattern that was simple and

clumsy, but dear to a mother's eye. Hauata had smiled and smiled with pride when she finished it, while Temana laughed at the awkward patterns, but in a kind way.

‘The music is different here,’ Hauata said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Even the sea has a different song here – in Raiatea it's more ... open. Here, it's closer, not so big, not so busy.’ Hauata smiled. Atea listened. ‘It's hard to say how. Even the way you pound arrowroot sounds different to how they do it there. And the trees - they rustle in shorter tunes - the birds make a lighter song - maybe more of them sing ... I don't know. All together it makes a different music.’

Atea smiled. Hauata noticed interesting things.

‘Did you miss our music?’

Hauata looked at her hands. ‘I didn't know until I came back. I was sad, and I missed everything here – but they were good to me. Everyone was kind; Nanihi made me my favourite dishes, and the cousins played the nose flutes at night – but it wasn't the same. All of it, I mean, not the flutes; even the waves didn't sound the same – I couldn't hear the crabs scuttling at night. All of it together was different - I didn't know about the music of a place. Maybe I didn't hear it when I was smaller, when we used to visit.’

Atea smiled. ‘I hadn't thought about it before. I know the sounds all through my body – without thinking, without knowing I'm listening – the moods of the sea and the sky, the sounds of the birds and insects...’

In a friendly silence they listened to the sounds around them. Happiness crept inside Atea's heart. Hauata was home. She was glad to be home. Ease spread through her, the heat of midday close around them, the mat underneath them comfortable and warm. The scent of tiare flowers floated from Hauata's garland. Atea leaned forward to settle the pounding stick. As she did so, her shoulder touched Hauata's. Her shoulder felt warm and firm.

Hauata moved away. It was a movement as small as the shiver of a leaf, but clear. She didn't want to be touched. Temana. What she'd done to Temana would always be there

between her and Hauata. Atea sat beside her daughter with her hands in her lap, still as coral.

The sun blazed.

After a while Hauata spoke again.

‘What can you do for Miri?’

This was the question of a woman; Atea was surprised to hear it, as Hauata had never been interested in birthing before. Miri’s baby would come soon, but it was lying sideways as if it didn’t want to make the journey yet. Atea had felt Miri’s belly the day before, but she didn’t think Hauata had noticed.

‘Miri’s well and strong. Sometimes the baby can be turned, and sometimes it turns by itself. When it’s ready to come, it will put its head down. Tomorrow I’ll go and give her lomilomi – Tehani is coming too – we’ll massage her so she’s ready for the birth. Perhaps I’ll try to turn it around, if it’s willing.’

‘Can I come with you?’

Hauata sounded as if she’d thought about this. Atea glanced at her face; it was steady and untroubled. The breeze rustled through the coconut fronds above. Atea wondered what the spirits were saying; perhaps they were pleased with Hauata for turning herself towards being a woman.

‘You don’t come to watch, you know – you have to help.’

‘I know.’

‘Then you’re ready.’ Atea leaned towards Hauata and kissed her cheek.

Hauata accepted the kiss. ‘Let’s go down and swim; it’s hot.’

Chapter 31

The decks were secured and the gun room checked and locked. Provisions, powder and shot were all locked away. The men had been searched for weapons, and even the cook's knives were removed. Henry inspected the fire damage to the quarterdeck; the deck would need repairs, but the burned boards were local – none of the supporting cross beams had caught. Nonetheless he ordered the area to be doused with seawater hourly. Several of the rum barrels had been breached, and there was considerably less porter and brandy on board. A large number of nails appeared to have gone with the deserters. He was impressed with their forethought.

Throughout the ship, the men were subdued; clearing up under the eyes of the marines, holystoning decks, and helping ship's carpenter prepare new boards. The watch system was functioning again, so some were sleeping while the others were on task. The dead were being sewn into hammocks. Coleman, the first man he'd killed. Ricketts, the seaman bayoneted by Neale. Henry thought of the sailmaker putting his final stitch through the nose, to make sure they were dead. There had been no sign of Williams' body since he'd pitched overboard – almost certainly drowned, as few sailors could swim. Only two men were laid out inside hammocks awaiting the final stitch. Twenty six were missing; it could have been far worse, Henry thought grimly. He should have returned when Roberts had asked. Happily, surgeon Lyons was wounded but not dead. He'd lost a lot of blood from a wound in his thigh, but he came to when he was dragged out from his hiding place behind the cannon. Using a crutch, he soon recovered enough to instruct Chaplain Knapp as they saw to the wounded. Midshipman Charles was critically injured, delirious in the sickbay. Both Langford's wound to the knee, and Atkins missing ear would heal if gangrene didn't set in.

Henry returned to his quarters with Roberts. They were still in disarray; bedclothes flung on the floor, paintings torn from the walls and dumped on the floor along with papers,

tankards and empty bottles. Roberts pulled the broken screens across to afford some privacy, as if he were closing a door.

‘First of all,’ Henry said, ‘let me apologise. I should have returned to command when you asked. I was an idiot to ignore you.’

Roberts bowed his head. ‘Thank God you came back when you did.’

Henry picked up an overturned chair and set it down for Roberts. He dusted off another for himself and sat.

‘Tell me what happened - as you saw it. How did it develop? Who, what, where – as much as you know.’

Roberts sat down, wiping his face with his handkerchief. ‘Orders came, Sir, from the Admiralty. I thought I’d better open them, in case it was urgent. That was two days after you’d gone, Sir, and I wasn’t sure how long you’d be...’ Roberts looked nervous.

‘Of course. You were right to open them - and?’

‘Her Majesty’s government has conceded Tahiti and the Society Islands to the French. Bruat knew. He sent a message over straight away. Managed not to crow too much.’

‘I see. Orders to return, then, I presume?’

‘That’s right Sir. I thought it best to keep it quiet - from the men at least - but Dr Lyons realised there was something - asked me why I was so cheerful all of a sudden. Couldn’t help it, Sir, once I knew we’d be going home...’

‘So you told him?’

‘And the other officers - once one knew, it seemed only fair... I told them to keep it to themselves, but somehow word got out. I don’t know - eavedroppers, maybe, a word here or there - I don’t know how, but it did. I’m sorry.’

‘And that set them off?’

‘Rumblings at first, you know the sort of thing - seamen falling silent when I approached, grumblings – then there was a dispute about shore leave - too many wanted to go ashore - to tell their women I suppose. We managed to squash that one, but the next day they hatched a plan to take boats ashore, with or without permission. Turnbull started

speechifying about the success of the mutiny on the Bounty - how they could stay, set up home, never mind another English winter...I'm not blaming the marines; I should have pre-empted it, but they weren't quick enough to stop the men taking control of the quarterdeck and before we knew it, they'd strong-armed enough weapons to bundle us into your quarters.

‘

Roberts hesitated, as if waiting for an outburst from his captain.

Henry simply nodded. ‘Carry on.’

‘The long and the short of it is that we'd been in there most of the night when you came, Sir. I hoped that they'd drink themselves into oblivion, and when all was quiet, we'd try and break out, regain control somehow - There was some rampaging before we were shut in, then they seemed to settle down to serious drinking. Some lowered boats and left. The men on the gun deck were singing some of the time, but we could just about hear the men up above on the quarterdeck. We opened your windows, better to eavesdrop. They made speeches; it sounded as if they were holding some kind of a court. Thwaite was holding forth, then Turnbull. Then -‘

Roberts hung his head in silence.

‘Yes?’ Henry asked.

‘Well, Sir. Old Groan says they tried Favour in your absence.’

‘Tried Favour? What do you mean?’

Roberts was silent. He was gazing at the captain's enamel basin, on the rug beside the upturned desk. Something small was in it, wrapped in dirty cloth. Fat black flies crawled on the cloth.

‘What? Roberts?’

Roberts turned to Henry, looking stricken. ‘That's Favour, Sir. In the basin. The men found her - what's left of her - when they cleared away the fire - ‘

Henry remembered the sailor's comment: he didn't like what they'd done to the dog. He'd been too busy returning order to the ship to think about it before. He'd assumed Favour

was hiding somewhere in the hold; she'd never liked a commotion. Roberts got up and stood beside him as he went to the basin.

He put his hand on Henry's sleeve.

'You might want to take a moment, Sir -'

Henry bent over, took hold of the blackened cloth and pulled. As it unrolled, flies buzzed out around his hands. Claws clicked against the enamel basin as the remains rolled out. Henry's stomach lurched as he recognised the scorched paws. It was her – Favour. Her head was crusted with dried blood, burned, her eyes horribly matt. This remnant was Favour, who should be dancing in to meet him, wagging and whining. She was always so thrilled to see him. His mind stumbled. He forced himself to examine her; her head still connected to her paws by her spine – one velvet ear flat over the outrage of raw bone. Her carcass smelled of cooked meat. Shreds of flesh were still stuck to her bones.

His mouth was so dry he could hardly speak.

'They roasted her? Ate her?'

Roberts made a barely perceptible nod.

Favour. There was nothing left to stroke. Disturbed flies droned around the room as Henry reached out, cupping the roundness of her skull. He touched the silkiness of her ear. It was stiff.

'I'm sorry, Captain.' Roberts spread his arms in an apologetic gesture that included the whole room. 'I'm sorry, Sir. They tried her in your place.'

'She must have been taken up on deck. I thought they were holding forth, full of themselves after their victory over us, but Old Groan said they tried her, with speeches and all - saying you'd abandoned the ship and the men could go hang while you played house with your mistress ...'

Roberts looked embarrassed. Henry feared it was probably worse; did they torture her? Roberts went on in a rush.

'We could hear the general tone through the windows - there were scuffles, and a lot of shouting - but we didn't know they had Favour ... It was all confused. I heard Brooks

screaming – he loved that dog. Then we heard them calling for wood. We were afraid the whole ship'd go up by then - they made a fire and...'

Henry got to his feet, pushing his fingers into his hair, turning away from Favour's remains. Was she dead before they began?

'Who was involved?'

'Hard to say from down here – I could hear Turnbull doing most of the speechifying, and Thwaite backing him up – Jones and Phillips were definitely egging them on - but it sounded as if much of the crew were there, or at least happy to drink the grog and go along with the antics of their mocked up court.'

Roberts looked exhausted.

'Sit down, man.' Shamed at his own dereliction of duty, Henry met Roberts' look of misery. Mutiny. Even his father spoke of it in awe. 'I'm sorry. You shouldn't have had to deal with this. You asked me not to go to Raiatea - but I didn't listen. You were right - you tried to warn me - I can only commend you for that.' Roberts turned his gaze to the floor. 'This is my fault alone. I didn't believe it was so serious. I didn't want to believe it.' Henry followed Roberts' gaze - his painting of Atea lay there on the boards, scuffed and trodden among several others. In spite of his impulse to pick it up, Henry just looked at it. 'I was wrong to go. I take full responsibility – and I'll ensure the Admiralty know that.'

Roberts was silent. Usually he'd be quick to reassure his Captain. His silence spoke volumes.

Henry continued. 'Once the ship's in order we'll get them up on the gun deck – all the men - and I'll talk to them. Marines and all officers fully armed. Surround them with weapons and I'll give them a - ' He realised he was going to say 'roasting'. Instead, he cleared his throat.

'Sir. The boy's dead too. Cabin Boy Brooks.'

Henry hadn't thought his heart could sink any lower. 'How?'

'Found dead in a hammock on the mess deck. Maddison reported to me not half an hour ago. He was found when they checked the hammocks for weapons. A wound to the

head, not gunshot; more of a blow.' Roberts glanced towards the enamel basin. 'We heard him shouting at them. Sounded as if he was defending the dog - you know what he was like.'

'I see.' Henry felt a lurch of gratitude and guilt. 'He was a good lad.' The boy was always with the animals, he'd had a soft spot for Favour, saving scraps for her, begging bones from the cook, collecting bits of ship's biscuit from the mess tables. He had a clear memory of Brooks sitting down by the pigpen, happily swinging a chicken foot above Favour's nose as she danced on her hind legs.

His whole body felt rigid. All this was his fault. He turned back to the basin and Favour's remains. He felt numb. 'I'll see to Favour now, while it's quiet. Then we'll look at Brooks.'

Henry rummaged through the bedclothes dumped on the floor beside his hammock, pulled the red silk cover Elizabeth had given him from the pile, and spread it out on the floor. Picking up the basin, he tipped its contents into the coverlet. Roberts stood by, waving the flies away. Looking around the floor, Henry picked up a large flint from home, which he used as a paperweight, and added it to the pathetic heap. Without a word, he closed the coverlet over what remained of his dog, wrapping it into a tight bundle.

On the top deck a couple of marines were standing by with Midshipman Percy, keeping watch over the sailors holystoning the deck. They averted their gaze when they saw the red bundle in the captain's arms; the peaks of Tahiti suddenly became fascinating. Henry and Roberts made their way to the rail on the starboard side where Henry took a moment to gaze over the side into the deeps. The sea was a dark, cerulean blue.

'Poor little bitch never liked water.'

'No, sir,' Roberts murmured.

Henry didn't want to drop her over the side with that thought in mind. He searched for something else. She'd never taken to swimming. On the one occasion when Henry had given her a bath as a puppy, after she'd rolled in the ordure of a fox, she'd looked utterly woebegone. Prudence and Elizabeth had giggled at her shaking, skinny legs and her

drooping ears. After the bath, she ran around rubbing herself on the sofas and rolling on the carpets until mother had her shooed out.

Roberts stood at Henry's side without a trace of impatience, although they both knew there were pressing things to attend to. What a fine friend he was, thought Henry, he'd every right to be resentful and impatient, yet he stood by, understanding this had to be done. Suddenly, Henry remembered Favour barking at the waves, the first time she saw the sea, on the beach at Lady Bay. She'd been frantic and gleeful, her tail wagging furiously as she pounced again and again at the surf, quivering with joy.

He let go. The bundle fell to the sea with a just audible splash. It remained there, suspended on the surface as the red coverlet darkened. One corner came adrift, soaked up seawater and sank. Both men leaned over the rail, side by side, shoulders touching. Henry imagined Favour coming to rest on the side of the underwater mountain that sloped down towards the ocean floor many miles below. Perhaps there would be a shelf, a rocky promontory where she could rest, curled in the silk. The sea slapped against the hull.

Henry straightened up.

Taking a deep breath, he took the pistol Roberts had been holding for him, then led his First Lieutenant down through the lower decks. Leaving Midshipman Percy to watch the men, the two marines followed close behind the captain. Roberts' face was grey. The men on the mess deck lay unconscious in their hammocks, or sat at tables watching in silence as they passed by. Few met Henry's eye. The usual salutes were absent. A dozen marines were spread out, conspicuously watching the sailors, arms at the ready.

Below, the orlop deck was empty save for a few marines and carpenter Bailey, who looked up as they came down the steps. Bailey stood back, saluting half heartedly. Henry nodded acknowledgement - it was the first salute he'd received apart from Roberts'; perhaps because Bailey was alone. Nearby stood an open coffin. Several others were at the ready. In the dim light, a body could be seen inside. The two marines stopped on either side of the door. Bailey stood to one side, cramped under the curve of the hull.

'At ease,' Roberts said. 'You may leave.'

Bailey left, closing the door to his workshop behind him.

Henry moved closer to the body. The boy was laid out in a rough coffin six inches too long for him. He hadn't had a chance to grow. His eyes were closed, his lips slightly parted. The waxy pallor of death made him look far older than he'd looked in life. Henry remembered his contented expression as he'd sat with the animals. Without his own negligence, this boy might yet be alive. Brooks' thin hands were crossed over his chest. Henry noticed with a pang that his nails were bitten down to the quick. He cleared his throat, controlling his anger and misery.

'Do you know how exactly he was killed?'

'Seems he had Favour and wouldn't give her up. There was a scuffle - he got hit in the head, a number of times. Looks as if he managed to get down to the mess deck - and into a hammock, maybe to hide -' Roberts looked miserable too.

The purple wound at Brooks' temple disappeared into his straggling, mousey hair. There was blood in his ear and around his eye, dried into the corners. Freckles adorned his cheeks. Henry hoped he hadn't suffered long. If only they'd left Raiatea earlier. If only he hadn't gone at all.

'How old was he?'

'Claimed to be sixteen, sir.' Roberts spoke quietly. 'Doesn't really look it, but some of them are half starved before they come on board.'

Brooks' cheekbones stood out above his hollow cheeks. Their sharp planes told Henry that this boy had never known plenty. He'd probably never even known enough, Henry thought, except when he was on board; the men were always fed as well as possible. And that was no comfort at all.

'Family?'

'Letters from his mother, apparently. I'll find out what I can.'

They stood in silence. Henry imagined Brooks' mother getting the news – in a run-down cottage somewhere, or a hovel in a seaside town. Or perhaps both parents were alive; twice as much misery. He laid his hand on Brooks' stiff fingers. Somebody's child. This

stripling had stood up to brawnier men of twice his age and strength, trying to protect his dog. Henry knew he could have prevented this death, and he felt culpable as he never had before. Deaths at sea were commonplace, but they were caused by accidents and disease, not his own negligence.

‘Can we find out who’s responsible?’

‘I doubt it.’ Roberts shook his head. ‘It was a general tussle – punches from several men - at least, that’s what the marines say - some of them were tied up and saw it...’ His voice trailed away into silence. ‘No reason to dispute it. No one seems to know exactly who hit him. Maybe Thwaite. Maybe more than one man. Serious punches, apparently, not just a slap. He wouldn’t let go of her.’

He fell silent, looking at the dead boy. ‘I only wish I could have stopped it.’

‘Not your fault, Roberts. This is my responsibility. All of it.’

Grisly scenes were unfolding in Henry’s imagination. Favour torn from Brooks’ grasp and his desperate fight to save her. Brooks staggering away, fatally injured, to hide in a hammock. Did anyone help him? His friend Larkhall had died some weeks before, falling from the main sail onto the deck.

‘We’ll bury him on land. But only him. I don’t want many men ashore digging graves - the others can be rowed out beyond the reef and buried at sea. It’s deep enough out there.’

Roberts nodded and Henry knew he understood his logic. Larkhall was buried at Pape’ete.

‘We’ve got our work cut out now. Either we flog them, or keep them in irons all the way back, until they can be court-martialled.’ Henry glanced at the closed door. He needed to act quickly and decisively.

‘It’d be tantamount to a death sentence anyway, sir, keeping them below decks all that time.’

‘I’d like to see them flogged.’ He turned to Roberts. ‘What’s your opinion? Maybe you can be a little more dispassionate.’

Roberts nodded almost imperceptibly. 'It's not a practical solution, is it, keeping them in irons? We'd have to feed them, and find new hands to take their place, and that won't be easy.'

'I'll let them off with a flogging in lieu of court martial, and I'll let them know how lucky they are. Then I'll have something to hold over them if they don't behave – they could still get the death sentence for mutiny.' Henry folded his hands behind his back. 'Flogging for the ringleaders at six bells. Sixty lashes for them.'

'Yes sir. That might kill them anyway, but it's surprising what they can take.'

'Those who took up arms against superiors, but didn't lead, can have thirty lashes. We can't flog the entire crew; we'll give them extra duties, stoppage of pay, and all hands to the cleaning up. I'll talk with the other officers to get a full picture. The men who attacked Brooks can dig his grave - after they're flogged. Perhaps that'll help it sink home.'

Henry gave Brooks' corpse one last look. His certainty that he could have averted all this if he'd been on board was poisonous as lead in his stomach. He'd been off fulfilling his own desires with Atea when he was most needed. Now it was duty, first and foremost.

'Let's give the officers their tasks. Divide the decks between the midshipmen so they're each responsible for an agreed area.'

'Yes, Sir.' Roberts looked relieved. 'Good to get the men in order while they're still suffering from the grog.'

'It's not over yet. The next few days will be the test.'

Chapter 32

Next day there was still no word from Henry. They'd had the feast for Hauata, and when Atea went down to the shore next morning, the ship looked the same - except there was no smoke any more. She sat down in the sand wishing he'd send a boat to tell her he was safe. Perhaps she could paddle a canoe out a little way, just to see? He'd asked her not to. But some of the men on his ship stank of danger. They all had knives at their belts.

After a while Hauata joined her. The fear in her face was clear.

'You won't go to his ship, will you?'

'Don't worry, I'll wait. That's what he asked.'

Hauata gazed out at the ship, her shoulders slowly relaxing. As the morning heated up, they waded into the water to cool off, standing waist deep, dipping down into the sea to wet their hair. Herenui paddled along the shore in his canoe, waving and calling out as he got closer.

'Popa'a boats! Coming from your tapitane's ship.'

Atea looked at Hauata. 'I'll go and see - do you want to come?'

Hauata was already wading out of the water.

As they walked along the shore, they could see several popa'a boats coming across the lagoon. Further down the beach, other people were gathering - Heimana was one of them. He waved to them as they walked along the wet sand. Once they got closer to Pape'ete, Atea and Hauata stopped and stood watching, standing in the shallows. Atea felt uneasy; she didn't want to greet him in a crowd with everyone else. When the boats arrived, popa'a men climbed out of the boats. She couldn't see Henry among them. Then a box was lifted out, one of the long boxes the popa'a put dead people in. Her people drew back; it was taboo to touch dead bodies. Her chest was tight with fear.

'Someone is dead,' Atea murmured. 'Where is Henry? Can you see him?'

Hauata didn't answer. Both of them splashed through the water towards the boats, Atea searching among the popa'a men for Henry, looking for his uniform, his wide shoulders. There were seamen in shirts, other officers, some holding guns...

Then at last she saw him jump out. He pushed back his hair the way he always did and relief flooded through her. It wasn't him in the box.

But he didn't come towards her or call out. Wasn't he looking for her? Beside her, Hauata called out.

'Tapitane Henry!'

Together they waded through the water towards him. Atea longed to touch him, glad to see he wasn't hurt – he moved his body without awkwardness. He was busy telling his men what to do, but as she and Hauata got closer, he turned towards them, raising his hand in a way that meant - stay away? She stopped, confused – did he mean it some other way? He was looking straight at them – there was no mistake; it was meant for them. For her. Then he turned his back, and went on speaking to his men as if he'd done nothing, as if she and Hauata weren't there. Her breath sat still in her throat.

He knew it was her. They were only a few canoe lengths away. He'd waved her away. It was as painful as any blow; if he'd slapped her it couldn't have hurt more. Why did he refuse to greet them? Why didn't he want her close? Perhaps it was the box with the dead one inside, she thought, he was warning them to keep away, he knew it was tapu - but then why didn't he come to her? She watched him, trying out reasons that didn't work. Perhaps something was different in the way he looked; he was stiffer, as he was when she first knew him, standing very straight as if someone had spoken harsh words to him and he wasn't going to show his misery. If he didn't want her close, she wouldn't go close. But it hurt that he didn't even come to talk. The pain of it burned in her chest.

Hauata stood beside her. 'Why is tapitane Henry being so rude?' She stared at the popa'a men as they lifted the box up on their shoulders like a ceremony, three along each side, and carried it up the sand.

‘I don’t know. He looks as if something is wrong. Perhaps it’s the box – he doesn’t want us to be near it. They must be going up to the place where they put their dead people, the quiet hill.’

Hauata began to wade through the surf. ‘I’m going to see.’

‘He doesn’t want us with him.’

‘I want to see,’ Hauata said. ‘I’ve never seen someone put in the ground. Don’t worry, I won’t go close.’

‘Hauata -’

‘It’s alright, I won’t go near him – I’ll go with Heimana if you don’t want to come, but I’m going to watch.’

Atea could see she wouldn’t be stopped. Hauata waded on ahead of her. Atea watched her daughter’s powerful back, her hair sticking at her waist where it was wet, her powerful legs swirling up eddies of foam. She was torn; she wanted to go, but Henry... he’d pushed her away. It felt as if he’d put his hand right in her face. Why? Underneath her, the sand moved and softened around her toes. All she wanted was to be near him, to see what was happening for herself. Even if she didn’t speak with him it would be better than standing unsure in the water, all alone.

‘I’ll come with you,’ she called.

As she caught up with Hauata, one of the officers was shouting. More men were being helped out of the boats. The men being pulled out were handled roughly – one of them almost fell as he struggled through the shallows. Perhaps they’d been trying to run away. The popa’a were always punished for trying to run away. The sailors walked across the beach as if they were hurt; curled forwards and slow. There were ropes tying their ankles together that made it hard for them to walk.

‘What’s wrong with them?’ Hauata frowned.

‘I don’t know.’

Atea felt trouble creeping along the skin of the sea. She stood still again, where the sea met the sand, hesitating. But as the group began to move off the beach, Hauata moved toward them again.

‘I want to see. I’m going to watch.’ Hauata looked determined.

Atea stepped out of the water. She had to go with her.

The popa’a gathered around the tied up ones at the end of the beach. Pastor Coe came to meet them, his robe flapping like a great bird. All the Tahitians hung back, then followed at a distance as the popa’a began to walk up the slope towards the burial place. Some carried the box on their shoulders, and others followed behind. The men with their legs tied were guarded by two with guns. The tied men were wearing dirty shirts, stained at the back. Atea was surprised, knowing that Henry liked his men to be clean.

Atea glanced at her daughter’s face as they followed the popa’a men; her eyes held a mixture of dislike, fear and interest. Hauata disliked the Oui-ouis, the enemy, the same as most Tahitians, but more because of Temana, and now she held the same suspicion for most popa’a, even if they came from different islands like the English, or the Americans. Maybe Henry was just another popa’a to her.

When they got to the burial ground, her people settled under the shade of some pandanus trees, close enough to watch. Hauata and Atea sat down near Heimana. Digging these holes took a while, he said. There were mounds and wooden crosses already there; three of the Pastor’s children had died and been buried there, and the others were sailors. The Oui-ouis had their own burial ground at the barracks, a bigger one. With his back to the Tahitians, Henry stood by, watching his men. He didn’t look at her, or come over to talk, although all he was doing was watching. It felt cruel to be ignored, but she decided she wouldn’t bother him during the ceremony.

The Pastor and the priest from the ship stood with their black books. One of the officers called out orders, and three men in the dirty shirts were untied. Two of them looked as if they were struggling to stand up, but one could walk upright. Atea wondered why Henry had chosen sick men to do the digging – they’d take longer, surely, and he usually

wanted everything done quickly. The swaying men were given tools – long handles with squares of metal at the end. A water bag was passed around. Then the three took off their shirts and prepared to dig.

Hauata gasped. Two of the backs they could see were covered with long, crusted marks. For a moment, Atea wondered if they'd been tattooed, but the marks were messy, more spread out on one side, gathered together in a mass of lumpy, raw flesh in the middle. It looked as if a giant bird had scratched and scratched at them. Blood still seeped from the cuts. Something hung in strips from their backs. Skin? Their shirts weren't dirty; they were stained from these wounds.

Her stomach clenched.

'What's happened to them?' Hauata whispered.

'I don't know,' Atea replied, putting her arm round her. 'It looks as if they've been cut.'

Hauata looked shocked. 'Do they do that to their own people?'

Heimana added. 'To the Oui-ouis, yes, to their enemies – why not? But those men aren't Oui-ouis, they're sick – they need to rest, not work in the sun.'

Atea said nothing. She couldn't explain popa'a ways. She watched the Pastor and the chaplain talking. Sometimes the Pastor gave reasons for things they did, but often they were reasons that didn't make any sense. Hauata looked horrified. She'd never want to go on a popa'a ship. An officer was pointing at the ground. They'd chosen the spot. Henry stood by without speaking, his face rigid and tired, his eyes fixed on his men. The three hurt men moved forward with their tools, and began to dig. Each thrust of the digging tools looked as if it pained them. Atea was glad the soil was sandy where they were digging, and there were no tree roots.

She remembered the Oui-oui soldiers around her as she was being tattooed, and turned to Hauata.

'Perhaps those men don't want us to watch. Do you want to leave?'

Without taking her eyes off the group, Hauata answered. 'No. They don't care. I want to stay and see what happens. They're too sick to care what we do.'

She crossed her legs and put her hands on her knees. Once again, it struck Atea that her daughter had changed from the girl she was.

They stayed in the shade, watching. After a while Heimana's daughter got bored and wandered away with the other children. The men digging took a long while to make the hole, but Henry still didn't come over to talk or sit with Atea and Hauata. The third man, whose back wasn't so badly cut, did the most work. When it was too deep for them to reach down, the men took it in turns to climb in and fling the earth out. Two of them looked ready to collapse, so Atea was relieved that they had a chance to rest. A pile of earth grew beside the hole. Even the watching sailors who were doing nothing were sweating in the heat – Henry wiped his face with the cloth he kept in his coat. The earth from the sides of the hole stuck onto the wet backs of the digging men, dark as their cuts. Their backs began to look as if they were patched with huge scabs. They staggered and faltered and changed places again and again. It hurt to watch.

Henry stood and watched too, his body tight and stiff. He didn't sit down, but after a while he did stand in the shade. Not near her – as if he couldn't see her, didn't know she was there. He was different when he was with his men, but never like this. She'd never have loved him if this were all she'd seen of him. Sometimes chiefs have to do difficult things, she told herself, sometimes they need to be harsh. Although she couldn't understand what he was doing, perhaps he wasn't easy with it either. Perhaps it was what he called duty. He talked about duty as if it was a message from the gods; it had to be obeyed even if he didn't like it. She could see he was suffering. As the men dug and dug he didn't even look towards her.

When the men digging changed over, they had to be lifted out of the hole by their armpits – they didn't have the strength to climb out. While they weren't digging they sat beside the hole, wobbling in the heat. When the sun was at its highest, one of them fell face down where he was sitting. He was dragged into the shade and left there. Another man

collapsed as he stood next to the hole. He was pulled into the shade alongside the other one. They lay side by side like fish laid out from a catch. The third carried on with the digging. When all they could see was his head sticking out of the hole, he fell down too. His head disappeared and didn't come back up. He was lifted out and four others were brought forward. When they took their shirts off, their backs were cut too, but not so badly.

'Don't they care that they're falling down?' Hauata murmured. 'Why have they cut them all?'

Atea felt the same questions sour in her mouth.

Heimana spoke without taking his eyes off the diggers. 'Our men kill in battle, but they don't shame other men like this – not even enemies.'

'They must be bad,' Atea said. 'Henry wouldn't do this for nothing.' But she couldn't defend him, because she couldn't understand either. 'Maybe he'll tell us afterwards.'

When the hole was done, the four sailors were tied together and made to kneel a short distance away. They were too exhausted to run anyway – was this more punishment? The chaplain from the ship came forward in his black dress, holding the book with gold edges that shone in the sun. The bible always made Atea think of when they burnt the gods when she was young. Pastor Coe said her people were a stiff necked people. While he read from the book, pouara came as grasshoppers and threw themselves in the fire. His book didn't look so big now, and the pastor didn't frighten her so much.

The other sailors laid ropes across the hole, then lifted the box onto the ropes on the ground at one side. Then they stood with their heads bent down around the hole, as if it was the hole in the ground that they were respecting. For a while the chaplain spoke in his special up and down voice, as if he was teaching a song. Atea was glad the dead man was in a box, so no-one would have to touch him. Henry still didn't look at her. He stared at the hole.

She watched the faces of the other men with concern. The words of the ceremony rose and fell like the gusts of a breeze, but it was hard to know if they cared about the man in

the box. They stood around the hole with their faces like wood. Then they picked up the ropes, and used them to lower the box into the ground – this was cleverly done. She watched Henry as he bowed his head. His eyes were fixed on the box, blinking as the chaplain slid up and down the words, but the sun was bright, and blue eyes weren't as strong as brown eyes. Even though he'd waved her away, Atea wanted to be beside him. The earth that the men threw on top of the box scattered on the lid with a lonely sound.

After the words were finished, four sailors who weren't so hurt took up the digging tools to fill in the hole. Some of the other popa'a sat down to rest in the shade. Henry walked a short distance away, the two priests with him, talking. Atea and Hauata looked at each other. The ceremony was over. This was what they did; put their dead in the ground then left them there all alone. The islanders began to leave. Heimana and Hauata said goodbye and walked away.

Atea sat alone in the shade. She wasn't going to let Henry ignore her. Was he angry with her, or did he just need to be alone to make the ceremony? She got up and walked towards him. He had his back to her, but Pastor Coe saw her coming and nodded, not in greeting. She could feel his eyes on her body as she walked over. Maybe he was thinking of her and Henry together – the knowing look stayed on his face as he looked back at Henry. Chaplain Knapp watched her too, but without the lust. Atea ignored them both as Henry turned around to face her, straight and tall, but awkward. In spite of the strange ceremony and the hurt men she couldn't help wanting to touch him.

But he didn't smile, or even look at her properly. He looked at the ground between them. Again, he held up his hand to her, palm outward, in that same cruel, go-away way.

'I want to talk with you -'

The priests drew back as she spoke as if she smelt bad. She stood in front of Henry, searching his face, trying to see what was wrong. He looked unhappy.

He shook his head. 'Not now.'

Atea gripped the sandy soil with her toes. She looked up at him, trying to see him as she knew him when the others weren't there, trying to see his kindness. 'But Henry -' Her stomach turned over – something was wrong between them.

'I can't talk to you now. Go away from here.' He sounded angry. But she hadn't done anything wrong. 'Go away.'

She dropped her hands in misery and backed away.

Chapter 33

Next morning Henry lay in his hammock, listening to the watch changing over. The ship was quiet; there was none of the usual ribaldry or singing as the men went about their tasks. He'd seen the pain in Atea's eyes, but he'd had to make her go. It felt horrible to feign such coldness, but it was the only way. He couldn't be seen to be standing chatting to her over Brooks' grave, but he prayed he'd be able to make her understand. It'd been hell during the funeral; she'd looked so hurt and confused it tore at his heart. But he couldn't afford to be seen to indulge himself – he couldn't risk losing his grip on discipline, for himself or the crew. The burial of Brooks had had to be a set piece displaying rigorous control.

The flogged men had all survived so far. The rum ration was still being withheld, and a great deal of cleaning was in progress. All was subdued on the decks. Alone in his quarters, it was bleak to lie in his hammock without Favour within reach. Elizabeth's portrait gazed out to sea. He wondered what the islanders knew of what had happened on board – perhaps they'd talked with the deserters. Or possibly those sailors had gone straight to the hills, maybe to join the Tahitians in the rebel camps. If he could get them back, they could argue they weren't deserting, but escaping the mutiny. He'd send a search party soon, but it was best to be sure the Salamander was settled before sending his marines off on a goose chase. Perhaps Bruat could help with some of his troops. He could understand the deserters only too well. Tahitian paradise, or the gruelling journey home – to what? Nonetheless, they had to be hauled back. Desertion could not be ignored.

What about Atea? Would she come with him when the time came? Would she want to leave her people, especially Hauata? He wished he could go ashore to explain, to reassure her of his love. He wanted to see the hurt in her eyes disappear as she understood.

As dawn began to tinge his windows, he doused his head with water and went up on deck, seeking the morning breeze. Roberts was already on deck, watching a ship approaching. It must have been waiting for dawn in order to negotiate the reef. Henry couldn't make out the flags, but it was probably French. Together, they leaned on the rails

watching, their guess confirmed as the ship sailed through the reef and dropped anchor. A French frigate. It gave a gun salute that was soon answered from the garrison.

'It's a good time to leave - for the men. Get them away from this place and its temptations.' Roberts gazed seaward as he spoke, without a sideward glance.

Henry guessed he meant Atea. She was a temptation. But Henry had no inclination for pussyfooting; Roberts had to know she was more than that. 'I think you should know - I've asked Atea to come with us when we leave.'

It was a long time before Roberts answered. Both of them stared out towards the new French ship in silence. Roberts got out his handkerchief and wiped his sweating forehead. Eventually he spoke.

'With respect, Sir - isn't that likely to inflame the men – make it that much harder to maintain discipline?' His incredulity was clear. 'After everything that's – surely the Admiralty won't be impressed.'

Henry could also hear restraint in his voice. He replied quietly.

'If she agrees to come I'll take care of that.'

'And doesn't she have a daughter? Think of the practicalities, Sir.'

He didn't want either Hauata or Atea on board, and who could blame him? But it wasn't his decision.

'Her name's Hauata.' Henry spoke with a confidence he wanted to feel. 'Yes, it's possible she could come too. She's old enough to decide for herself, but the offer will be there.'

Roberts pressed his lips together, a flush rising in his cheeks. 'Does she realise what kind of risk she'd be taking - Atea - bringing her daughter on such a voyage, let alone coming herself? I know Tahitians have joined up as crew before, but – they weren't women, Sir. The men are on a knife edge as it is, and having women on board won't help - going about half dressed the way they do – where would she sleep and wash and -'

Henry interrupted. 'I'm sure we can look after Hauata, if she decides to come. I'll be responsible for her safety. She'll be treated with due respect.'

‘Sir, that may be hard to enforce. Isn’t it adding insult to injury, after what’s happened?’

‘I’ll make sure everyone knows their place. I don’t underestimate the difficulties.’ Henry was curt.

Roberts shook his head. ‘Up ‘til now, Sir, I was looking forward to the prospect of leaving, but I find it hard to believe you’re saying this.’ He paused. ‘Then there’s the risk of illness, Sir – these islanders don’t always stand up well to being taken away from home, do they?’ Roberts assumed his most tactful tone. It was obvious that he was trying another tack. ‘Even the strongest men often get sick and die when they’re taken on as crew - and Heaven forbid, but if either of them should fall ill – they don’t tend to recover - ’

‘Roberts, I know it will be difficult, but I want Atea to come. I’m well aware of the dangers, and it’s not a decision she’ll take lightly.’

Even as he spoke, Henry had the sinking feeling that Roberts wasn’t ever going to understand his love for Atea. Judging from his face, he suspected his captain had gone mad. Perhaps he’d never understand, but for the sake of their longstanding friendship, he wanted Roberts at least to respect his decision. ‘They’re just people, you know, and they won’t be the first islanders to go to England. You want to be with Emily. I want to be with Atea. It is actually as simple as that.’

Roberts was shaking his head again. ‘Sir, I beg to differ. It’s not the same at all. Emily is English, and - and - a lady.’ He gripped the rails as he spoke.

Henry bowed his head. Roberts’ words registered painfully inside, but he wasn’t about to suggest pistols at dawn. He was under no illusion that it would be easy, but rather than berating Roberts, he felt a surge of pity for his ignorance. ‘I’m sure I’ve told you before that, as her midwife, Atea has the same status as Queen Pomare - it could be argued that she’s of higher ‘rank’ than your beloved Emily.’

Angry patches of red flared on Roberts’ cheeks. ‘Honestly, Sir, even setting the difficulties of the voyage aside, how do you think it would be back at home? How could she manage in polite society? What sort of conversation will she be capable of? Will she learn to

play the pianoforte? What will her daughter be doing with all the young men? What sort of a dance might she perform at a ball? You know these people don't understand restraint.'

Henry took a deep breath.

'*These people* live with restraint daily. Their island has been repeatedly invaded by people who kill the men, use the women and bring disease to all. Have you noticed the barricades – the extreme civility the Tahitians practise when they're given 'permission' to walk on their own paths? *These people* practise levels of forgiveness and acceptance that we find hard even to imagine.

'Roberts, you're trying to inflame me, and I refuse to be inflamed. Those things, dancing, conversation, how to dress, they can all be taught – I learned them, you learned them – it's not as if they're so very difficult – and if Atea doesn't want to be in society, we'll live quietly in the country. Other individuals from these islands have been feted at home – Omai was both popular at court and respected for his lively intellect, by all accounts. His portrait was painted by Reynolds, his opinions were discussed all over London, you know that. People at home may be more interested in other customs – and more respectful - than you presume.'

Roberts sighed. Several rowing boats were being lowered from the new French ship. Henry thought he must sound terribly pompous to Roberts' ears, but he was determined to press his point.

'And as for Hauata, you mistake the choices the women here make. An offer of love isn't regarded as wanton or obscene – quite the opposite; it's regarded as a generous gift. You may have noticed; some of the women offer themselves, and others don't. I expect Hauata can behave with the same integrity as her mother.'

Roberts rolled his eyes skywards. 'For God's sake, Captain, you're overlooking the obvious! What about her face? Her tattoo? '

For a moment, Henry was silent. He could see her face, her eyes lit up with welcome. With an extraordinary shock, he realised that he'd forgotten her tattoo. In his mind, her face was alight with loving kindness – the face that he loved – and the tattooed marks

were just the sad emblem of misjudgement by the French. A rush of protective horror swept over him. Roberts was right; people would think it was true.

'But she's not a murderer!'

'Her face will say otherwise to everyone she meets.'

'But once they get to know her - no one here treats her any differently - ' Even as he said it, he knew it was a vain hope. He could well imagine his mother's icy response. Very few would be much different.

'That's it, though, isn't it? Everyone here knows her, and you'll be taking her where no one does. That tattoo will speak to everyone she meets. Besides, how do you think the Admiralty will react if you bring back a criminal? She's no Omai.'

Atea always insisted on taking the blame for Temana's death. She'd readily admit guilt if anyone asked. Again, Roberts was right; she'd be thought a criminal whatever he had to say about it. It would prove an endless trial for her; having to cope with constant judgement – as well as homesickness. He'd overlooked something so obvious. He glanced at Roberts, shamefaced at his own stupidity.

'You're right. Of course you're right. But -' Nonetheless, he still wanted to make it possible; he couldn't give up his cherished dream. 'What if we live in a small place like Wraxall, where people can get to know her, like they do here, then she can be judged by her deeds, not by that word? Perhaps in the end it'll be a measure of how civilised the English are, that they won't be swayed by French errors of justice -' He was clutching at straws, but he couldn't admit defeat.

'You'd be married, would you, Sir? And children?'

With a horrible sinking in his stomach, Henry realised he hadn't thought that far ahead. His mother and sister – what would they make of children like Hauata? He was stymied; he couldn't imagine a wedding and he couldn't imagine his mother embracing a grandchild with a sweet brown face.

His imagination floundered, but he refused to be defeated. His mother disapproved of him anyway, and Prudence could make up her own mind. 'Perhaps people would be more accommodating than you imagine -'

Roberts merely shrugged. 'Perhaps.' But his dull tone spoke volumes. He nodded towards the new frigate, his eyes narrowed. 'Look – one of their boats is coming here.'

It wasn't long before the rowing boat reached the Salamander. As they expected, the bundle of letters contained further orders from the Admiralty. They were to return to England as soon as they'd made ready. The British government had formally agreed that Tahiti was to be a Protectorate under the French. Several pages elaborated the details. Presumably the Governor would have the same news. After ordering extra vigilance on board, Henry went ashore to discuss the news.

The Governor managed not to gloat, but he couldn't conceal his jubilation as he plied Henry with a celebratory luncheon of freshly baked bread and preserved meats. Early that morning he'd sent troops up to clear out the rebel camp. Henry had no appetite.

'My gens d'armes will burn all their huts, bring the last ones down,' said Bruat, sliding his knife into the crust of fat sealing a jar of pâté. He spread the pink paste thickly on his slab of bread.

The pâté smelled dubious.

Henry took some cured ham. 'Are many left up there? Six of my crew are still missing, and I wonder if they might have joined the rebels.'

'Yes, I hear you have some problem with the discipline.' Bruat was trying not to smirk, but his eyes were gleeful nonetheless.

'Most have returned to ship now, but there are those six unaccounted for. I'd be grateful for their return if they are up at Faoutaoua.'

'Of course, if they are there, we will return them to you at once. Here, have some bread; it's very good. French flour is superior to all others.'

Noticing how much his loyalties had shifted Henry swallowed a few mouthfuls; he felt the pain of the Tahitians' defeat in his constricted stomach. He couldn't help hoping the islanders would concede and save on casualties, but the warriors he'd seen at the camp seemed more likely to fight to the end, no matter how bitter. Perhaps some might disappear into the forest, go to the other side of the island, return to their families. They could blend into other villages, or return by canoe, as if they'd been away visiting other islands.

'I hear you went on a journey to Raiatea?' Once again, the concealed smirk. It wasn't surprising Bruat wanted to needle.

'Luckily I returned in time.'

Henry wasn't going to be drawn, but neither was he going to allow Bruat to mock. He had a motive in meeting with the Governor, and wanted him to maintain his buoyant mood. As the Governor plied him with rillettes and jars of olives, his mind kept flicking to Atea. Such was the governor's bonhomie once they'd emptied two bottles of wine, he tried his luck.

'Governor, now that we're leaving, I wonder if I could ask you a favour – a parting gift, if you will.'

Bruat inclined his head with his most statesmanlike air. 'I only hope I have the means to satisfy your request.'

Henry wondered if he practised magnanimity in one of his gilt framed mirrors. Smiling as if oblivious, he met the governor's patronising gaze. Here they were, civilised people talking, while a few miles away people were being shot and killed in an unequal fight. He cleared his throat. At least he could equal Bruat in a display of pomposity.

'I've always admired your fine collection of native carvings and *objets*, and I hesitate to make such a bold request, but I doubt I could locate such items myself in the time we have left. There were some figures I particularly admired, and I wondered, if you could bear to part with them, whether I might have them as a memento – a souvenir of the island and the accord we've maintained so successfully between our nations.'

'Ah, my carvings! Of course, of course – naturally, I shall be happy to give some such token. *De rien*. After all, it seems I shall be here some time longer.' Bruat beamed with triumph. You must tell me which ones – *venez* - come, come -'

The governor rose from the table, leading the way. Henry hoped he'd be able to find the carvings he had in mind. He could identify them from Atea's description, but what if there were others that were similar? He followed the Governor into the dim room. Bruat opened the shutters, then returned to the cupboard housing his collection. He opened the doors with a flourish. As there was no glass in them, it was something of an empty gesture, but Henry made appreciative noises. There were many *objets*, large and small, lying on three deep shelves. On the top shelf, in pride of place, there were half a dozen shrunken heads flanked by atua and bowls. In the centre of the middle shelf, a pair of big cava bowls were displayed on their sides. Henry remembered how interested Roberts had been in the cava bowls - the extensive array of sexual connections between men and women, men and men, and even women and women.

Bruat beamed as he followed Henry's gaze. 'I hope you don't want the bowls – they are - *qu'est ce que c'est* – close to my heart? I think they will be very popular in Paris when I return...'

'No, no – too daunting for me -' Henry murmured, searching for figures that could be the ones he wanted.

On the lowest shelf there was a stone carving the size of a new baby, its limbs tucked in, its face closed up as if sleeping, and beside it, two small figures made of dark wood, one male and one female. They didn't look as old as some of the other pieces. Although they had stylised, adult faces, their bodies were rounded like babies, their knees and elbows bent up as if sleeping. They must be the ones; there were no others that matched each other so closely, as if they were carved from the same tree.

Trying to seem casual, Henry pointed. 'Do you know what those are?'

Bruat picked them up. He waggled them together, dancing them off the shelf and into the air like two dolls.

'They're not supposed to worship us,' Bruat squeaked like a puppeteer, 'but they don't stop. No, they don't stop – all the little gods and goddesses – so scared we'll eat them up – grrr!'

It struck Henry that a few months ago he might have been amused. Now using these figures as marionettes seemed grotesque; he knew what heartbreak they represented. Feigning an air of abstracted interest, Henry examined them.

'Would they be a terrible loss to your collection?'

Bruat pouted, putting the male back.

Damn. He'd asked too soon. Or perhaps the governor was disappointed Henry wasn't joining in with his levity.

Bruat blew dust off the female figure's head as he replaced her. 'I like them, of course. They are my most recent – how do you say – acquisition? They are like babies, no?'

Henry smiled affably, nonetheless thinking that Bruat had no babies, no children. Surely he couldn't feel sentimental about these?

He nodded. 'Yes, they are. Like babies, and also somehow ancient. New-borns are sometimes like that, aren't they?'

Bruat didn't answer. Maybe he'd never seen one. Maybe Madame Bruat had never borne a child. In the silence, Henry allowed his gaze to roam over Bruat's shelves as if he wasn't particularly interested in the pouara. There were tattooing tools, and a bowl stained with candlenut paste. He let his eyes slide over them; he wasn't going to talk about tattooing.

'What about this?' Bruat held up a stone atua like a large smooth child with its legs curled up. 'I am happy to give you this one.'

Damn. Perhaps he was being too casual. Henry looked at it with what he hoped looked like sufficient interest. 'Yes, it's well made.' He stroked its curved back. 'How do they get it so smooth?'

Bruat inclined his head.

'Bah - they have nothing else to do all day, these natives.'

Henry reached out to the pouara. Enough messing about.

‘It’s an interesting piece, but, do you know, I’m rather drawn to these two...’

He touched the shoulder of the male figure; it was slightly hunched as if in pain. Bruat replaced the stone atua carefully on the lower shelf, and took down the male pouara, but he didn’t seem keen to let it go. He picked up the female in his other hand and held them side by side, rubbing their rounded bellies with his thumbs. Suddenly Henry felt distaste for his small hands, the dark hairs sprouting on his fingers.

‘They are my most new –’ Bruat mused.

‘Perhaps it’s because I’m a twin myself...a boy and a girl.’

Would that do it? Henry watched his face. Bruat glanced up with some kind of recognition. It was true, after all. The look in Bruat’s eyes shifted. Did he know about Eliza’s death?

Bruat held out the figures as if the matter were settled.

‘They can be replaced. *De rien*. If we dig under the floor in their huts, often we find these. Tahitians are not clever at hiding things.’

He pushed them into Henry’s arms.

‘We can find more, I am sure.’

‘Thank you. Most generous of you.’ Henry bowed, looking into Bruat’s eyes with genuine thankfulness. ‘They will be cherished, I assure you. When was it you said you acquired them?’

‘Oh, just before you arrived. A day or two before, *je pense*.’

So they almost certainly were Atea’s.

Henry found himself standing with a pouara in the crook of each arm, as if they were Eliza’s twins. They nestled there, two small solid weights, snug along his forearms. How happy Atea would be to have them back. Their odd little faces looked ancient and contorted, yet still somehow like the faces of new born babies.

Chapter 34

Atea stood thigh deep in the sea, feeling the aliveness of the air around her, the sparkle of sunshine bouncing off the lagoon. Her legs were cool while her shoulders were warm.

Tehani was beside her, silent with a friend's warm silence. They looked towards the popa'a ships in the bay. Both of them were afraid. Again Oui-oui soldiers had gone up into the forest. The sea cooled their hands as they stood together, sending love and strength to the warriors at the mountain camp.

Hauata was playing in the shallows with Tapoa, digging a hole in the sand for a fish they'd caught, making a barrier so the fish couldn't swim away, both of them admiring its silver shine, its pretty fins. Tapoa was younger than Hauata; she'd carried him on her hip when he was a baby. His father was at the camp at Faoutaoua; he'd been there for many months.

Tapoa saw the Oui-ouis setting off early that morning in the direction of the Faoutaoua camp. He ran to his mother, and Herenui sent older boys to run to the camp. The boys were fast; they'd get there before the soldiers. Everyone was waiting. Johnson had his horse ready; he'd help any islanders who needed his medicine. Tapoa said the Oui-ouis had many guns on their shoulders. Everyone knew guns fired long before the swing of a club could reach them.

The mountains were weeping; mist hid their highest peaks. How many would die? Her people were brave, but the Oui-ouis had more men. Another ship was in the lagoon. More and more, forever. The Governor said they could live as before, but it could never be the same; there would be sons and husbands gone, children without fathers, emptiness that couldn't be filled or forgotten.

Atea gazed out towards the Salamander. All the popa'a ships were moored out there in the deeps, where the sea darkened and big creatures slid through the underwater quiet.

Why had he held up his hand to her?

At the burial she couldn't see any of his kindness. She knew the work of a chief could seem harsh. When she was with a woman birthing a baby, sometimes she had to speak strong words, to make her work hard, to stop her drifting away. Maybe she seemed harsh, too. Henry was holding many threads in his hands. She trailed her hands in the water, but she wasn't going to paddle her canoe to him, she'd wait for him to come to her.

'Is Johnson ever harsh with you?' Atea asked. Tehani was contented; perhaps she understood popa'a ways better.

Tehani took a moment before she answered.

'Maybe he's glad to have me with him. Sometimes he doesn't notice things, then that feels as if he doesn't care – but usually he comes back to me.'

'What do you mean?'

'He might be busy with something; bits of paper, some problem with another popa'a, and he doesn't see how I am that day – and it feels bad, that I'm with him and he doesn't see how I am. He's too busy with what he's doing. But I know he'll come back, after a while ... Then he has to make it right with me.'

Atea smiled.

'Yes, but not just to get what he wants,' Tehani went on. 'I wouldn't stay with him if it was like that. I know he wants to be close, and sometimes being harsh can be part of being close, can't it?'

'Like when you have to speak the truth, even if it hurts for a while?'

'Yes, and that makes us closer, even if it's hard to hear, or makes me angry. I speak the truth to him, too.'

It was comforting to hear that Tehani was happy with her popa'a.

'He held his hand up to me,' Atea said. 'Henry. When they came to bury their dead man. He didn't want me near him.'

Tehani's eyebrows went up. 'Did you do something?'

'I didn't do anything – I haven't seen him for days.'

'Miri said there was trouble on his ship – is it that?'

‘I don’t know - I can’t know if he doesn’t speak with me.’

‘Maybe he has to protect you ... Aren’t some sailors hiding in the forest?’

‘That’s what Herenui said.’ She sighed. ‘But sailors always want to stay.’

Tehani swished the water. ‘It’s been two days, and he hasn’t sent men to get them back - maybe he still has troubles on his ship?’

‘I don’t know.’ Atea looked over the water. Even in the hot sun she shivered. She lowered her voice so Hauata wouldn’t hear. ‘He asked me to go with him – ‘

Tehani looked at her. ‘Go with him? To his island? That would be hard. All those men on his ship – you’d never come home – I’d die of that sadness.’

How could she know what she wanted now?

Atea pictured herself sitting in Henry's quarters, looking out of his windows, wrapped up in his coloured cloths, warm in his hammock. She loved to watch him using his mysterious instruments; shaving his face with a knife and his block of fat, rubbing up foam with his brush made of animal hairs. He looked so funny as he made faces, scraping his skin. He loved to be clean, like a Tahitian. When they came to other islands she could watch his beautiful hands painting. At night they’d light a lamp and lie down together with the sea rocking beneath them.

‘It’s good to be with him,’ she said. ‘I’m happy with him, loving him.’

Tehani shifted in the sand. ‘And will it be the same in his country? Will you be happy never coming back?’

There'd be no family, nowhere to wander that was home, no friends to talk with – and no need for a midwife on a ship, but maybe they’d need one in England?

And there was Hauata. Atea looked at Hauata and Tapoa playing. If she stayed with Hauata, Henry would sail away without her. Did Henry understand what it meant to leave her child? Even thinking about it made tears swell at her eyes.

‘Atea, is he worthy of you?’

She could feel Tehani watching her, waiting. The question woke her up; she hadn’t been thinking of it that way, just that she could comfort him and he could comfort her. It was

a shock to be reminded of her own value. Since Temana died, she'd felt alone and sick at herself. Henry took her out of her aloneness. She looked after him, felt longing for him, was easy and relaxed beside him - but was he worthy? It was hard to know. There was the longing, but there was also his hand held up, keeping her away from him.

The fish swam around the shallow pond they'd scooped.

'Perhaps your fish wants to see his friends now,' Tehani said.

Tapoa spoke in a ceremonial voice. 'And now after his happy stay in beautiful Tahiti, the fish says thank you for looking after him, and goodbye -'

Bending down, Tapoa scraped an opening in the lumpy reef he and Hauata had built. They grinned as the fish continued swimming in a circle.

'Look - he doesn't want to leave,' Hauata said.

Tehani smiled. 'Perhaps he's been enjoying your company.'

Atea watched the fish. She'd lived each moment with Henry happily, just being, and giving her gifts. Would he look after her happiness as if it was his own? Would he take care of her far from home? What if he held his hand up to her again?

Tapoa scooped the opening so it was deeper, then stood back. At last the fish nosed through, skimming his belly over the sand, fins frilling. He hesitated as if tasting the lagoon for danger, then silver flickered as he swam away.

'We let him go! We let him go!' Tapoa and Hauata chanted.

As the fish disappeared, Atea heard her name being called. She turned around to see Miri struggling along the beach, waving.

'Atea! I need your help,' she called. 'The baby's coming -'

Chapter 35

Henry had been back on the Salamander for three days, yet it felt longer. Bruat's men hadn't found any deserters with the rebels. He'd ordered a party of marines to search, but it was a token gesture; they were unlikely to find them in the forest, and they could be on the other side of the island by now, or they could have taken a canoe to Moorea, or any other island. The Tahitians would know where they were, if they wanted to tell. Although he felt an unspoken sympathy for the deserters, as Captain, he was obliged to try and find them. It was a good excuse to go ashore and try to see Atea. Now that control felt established on board, his absence could be borne for a few hours. In a tone that brooked no argument, he told Roberts he was going ashore with the search party. Roberts entreated him to be back before sunset. It was clear he knew who his captain really wanted to find.

Henry put the two pouara in a sack along with his water bag and parted from the marines when they reached the shore, instructing them to search the forest near the routed rebel camp. He walked along the bay away from Pape'ete to Atea's hut. He was disappointed that Atea wasn't there, but Hauata was sitting with Herenui nearby, in the shade of a palm at the edge of the beach, close to a half-made canoe. Both of them were relaxing, cutting coconuts and drinking milk from the nut. A small pile of coconut shells lay on the ground beside them. Bundles of sennit rope, used to bind planks together, lay nearby. Herenui's canoes seemed to require a lot of contemplation of the unfinished craft, but Henry respected his ability to make such seaworthy craft with his limited tools and materials.

As Henry approached, Herenui got up, cut the top off a coconut and offered it to him. Conscious of his limited time, but knowing that Tahitian etiquette demanded a full exchange of greetings, Henry sat down. He smiled at Hauata, rushed through the usual enquiries after health, then asked if Herenui knew where any deserters might be. Herenui was unforthcoming although Henry assured him the men would not be punished like the others. When Herenui remained obdurate, Henry changed tack and asked where Atea was. Herenui replied that she was in the forest with Miri.

'Where?' Henry stood up, unable to conceal his impatience.

Herenui waved towards an area of forest stretching up from the beach.

'But you don't go,' he added. 'Don't try to find her. Miri's husband is out fishing, with Heimana. It's not a place for you there.' He looked Henry in the eyes, raising his eyebrows. 'Atea is with Miri – it's tapu for you to go there.'

'I see. Well then, I'll find my men.'

Henry thanked Herenui and set off down the beach as if he agreed, as if he was going back, but once he was out of sight of Herenui he cut back towards the forest. He didn't have much time, and he needed to see her. There were so many things that were tapu – forbidden – and he'd apologise. Herenui couldn't be expected to understand his urgency. He wanted to put his position to Atea; that they'd be leaving soon – and he wanted her to come with him. The whereabouts of Miri's husband was irrelevant – why had Herenui mentioned that? Perhaps it was something to do with the deserters? Both Herenui and Hauata had adopted the opaqueness sometimes assumed by Tahitians when they didn't want to divulge something. Or perhaps they guessed what he wanted to ask, and of course they didn't want Atea to leave. That was probably it. Maybe they were picking vi, or medicinal plants. He hoped that Miri would leave when he arrived.

It was sweaty work finding his way through the forest, but soon he found a path that went in the general direction Herenui had indicated. The path was trodden often enough to keep the undergrowth at bay, and he listened for voices as he walked. It grew cooler under the dense shade of the trees. As he penetrated through the dim quietness he was reminded of the atmosphere in churches at home; colder than outside, the hush, the damp smell. He remembered the day he'd got the news of Eliza's death; his rush through the forest, the tangles of vine and shrub, the welcoming shelter of the mape tree.

Atea had led him back to life and pleasure and love, soothing him with her watchful patience. The path began to incline gently upwards. As reluctant to call out to her as if he were in a church, Henry stopped and listened. There was nothing but the sound of a nearby

grasshopper rubbing its legs together. Following the sound, Henry saw it, a large yellow chap sitting bold as brass on a nearby bush. Henry walked on, listening.

The quiet of Tahitian forest never ceased to impress him – nowhere else had he known such an absence of birdsong. At home the air would be laced with the many layered conversations of birds; woodpigeons, tits, treecreepers, finches, rooks, dunnocks, cuckoos – one could judge the time of year, even the time of day by the sound - and there'd be squirrels running overhead, pheasants calling, jays scratching in the leaf mould. Here, only mosquitoes hummed in the silence. As well as their drone, Henry thought he could hear something else, a deeper humming - chanting, perhaps. He changed direction, towards the east, pushing through the undergrowth. After having to motion Atea away at the burial, he feared she might hide if he called out, so he went quietly, listening intently.

It was chanting, or singing. It came towards him in gusts as he wove between trees. It seemed like a ceremonial chant, low and powerful, and alongside it, something else – that strange 'ha' breathing? Perhaps there was some dancing happening? It was forbidden, but he knew they still practised, and danced on occasion... Cautiously, he made his way towards the sound. It was a hard, nasal chant like the one he's heard at Atea's tattooing, rising and falling, forceful then softening. It reminded him of the crew's work songs, rhythmic and measured as they drew up the anchor. It sounded like Atea – but was it her? There was only one voice, and no drum, so perhaps not dancing after all.

She was in a thicket of bushes. As he pushed through, he could see Atea's head, unmistakably hers, with a thin garland of twisted palm, and the curve of her dear cheek. She was bending forward, singing and concentrating on something in front of her. His view was obscured by the bushes, so he slid to the side, to get a clearer view – Henry stopped dead. Miri was naked, squatting in front of Atea as she knelt behind. Miri was shiny with sweat, breathing hard, dirt smeared on her forehead. She panted with effort as he watched, transfixed, his stomach somersaulting as Herenui's warning became clear. Miri was in labour. Hands on the ground, she tipped forward, breasts hanging, the muscles of her thighs tense.

He stood stock still, horrified. Miri pressed forward, her face darkening with strain as she put her chin to her chest and braced herself. Kneeling behind her, Atea pressed and stroked Miri's back, chanting as her friend bore down. Henry crouched down as she leaned back into Atea, panting. He didn't want to watch, and he didn't want to make a noise by moving away. Immobile with embarrassment, he crouched down, eyes on the forest floor, ashamed to be intruding. Atea crooned as Miri rocked forward again. Miri made a desperate sound, almost like creaking.

'The head is coming, the child is coming, coming to Taaroa -' Atea chanted.

Miri's breath snatched in small, animal gasps as she bore down. Henry glanced up. Her expression reminded him of a man he'd watched having his leg cut off; concentrated, explosive with pain. Sweat was dribbling down his own face. He remembered the wails reeling through the house when Prudence was born – he was four years old and couldn't believe that his dignified mother could make such terrible noises. It had been so frightening that he and Eliza hid under the table in the nursery, trying to escape the animal wails. His father and the menservants were caught in the sound as if it were treacle, hanging in a helpless limbo while the women busied about their mysterious tasks. Unusually, father had suggested a game in the library, but the nursery seemed safer. It wasn't. They could still hear their mother mewling like the vixen at night.

Miri let out a terrible, tearing groan.

'He's here, he's here -' Atea called out.

Henry waited for the cry, staring at his boots. He knew that newborn babies cried, then you knew they were all right. A mosquito whined in his ear. There was no cry. In the silence Atea murmured something he couldn't hear. There was still no cry. Was something wrong? Atea had stopped chanting, but was talking in a low murmur, as if she were praying. Was there some difficulty? Perhaps he could do something to help – run for Johnson? He peeped over the tops of the bushes. The two women were leaning over the baby. Miri was holding it. Its face was dark, its body hung like a rag doll.

Impelled to help, Henry rose to his feet and called out 'Atea –'.

Atea looked up, straight at him. Her eyebrows drew together as her eyes flared. In one quick move, she raised a hand and flicked her fingers. Go away.

Miri didn't look round. She collapsed on her side, curled up like a baby herself, her face hidden. Atea began scraping earth with her feet, the limp baby in her arms. It was dead. Its arm swung down over hers, lifeless.

She was burying it.

Henry backed away. Atea and Miri ignored him. Overcome with shame, he pushed back through the undergrowth, stumbling back down the path towards the beach, berating himself for his stupidity, his selfishness, his utter pigheadedness. She was right to be angry. He'd intruded on a private, sacred moment. His insensitivity was unforgivable. Ever since he'd returned to the ship, all their meetings had been frustrating, wrong. At the burial – and now this. Why had he ignored Herenui's warning? Furious with himself, he got back to the shore in no time at all, walked straight into the sea and doused his head in the waves.

Chapter 36

Atea and Miri walked back to Miri's hut. Both were silent. Heremanu wasn't back from fishing. Miri lay down on her mat and Atea washed her with water from the gourd, then put her hands on her, stroking her shoulders until she slept.

Once she was sure Miri was asleep, Atea picked up the empty gourds and went to the sea. Wading into the water, she sank down into the cool. She needed to wash off the long labour; Miri had tired, and Atea had feared for her. The baby came out with his face first, after being stuck for so long Miri was losing her strength. When he came out he was a bad colour, but he'd taken a breath before Miri put her thumbs to his neck.

Atea opened her eyes into the underwater blue. Her hair floated around her. Grandmother Puatea said pouara weren't supposed to cry out. A ray swam towards her, then nosed away. The pouara had gone on his journey. She'd done what she had to do. They'd given him to Taaroa as he asked. It was always painful; at each birth all she wanted to do was hold the baby, quiet it with love. Instead she had to make herself strong enough to press her thumbs into the neck. Or stay beside the mother or father as they did it. Most parents had the courage to do it themselves.

Henry had made it harder. Why did he come? Atea rose up through the water, pushing her hair back from her face, wiping the wet from her eyes. Loosening her pareo, she squeezed it out, then slapped it against the surface of the lagoon, again and again.

Then she let it float beside her. The struggle had to be released. The sweat and strain of it. Miri's pain. The baby. Bending down under the water, she rubbed her hands in the sand around her feet. Scooping up handfuls of grit, she rubbed it down her body, down her legs, down to her ankles and feet. When she'd finished cleaning herself, she scraped out her nails with a piece of shell. Then she travelled her hands fast through the water, all around her in a circle, just under the water's skin. Let the pouara go. Breathing strong 'ha' breaths, she let him go. She wrapped her pareo around her as she waded out of the water. At the water's

edge, she flicked droplets from the ends of her fingers, scattering them over the sea, murmuring thanks to Hina.

She filled the gourds with sea water and carried them back to wash Miri again, but she was sleeping. Exhausted, Atea rolled out another mat, lay down beside Miri and waited for Heremanu. When he came back it was dark.

Then Atea went back to her own hut, the stars lighting her way back. Her hut was silent and empty; Hauata was with Tehani. She lay down on her sleeping mat, gazing out of the doorway at the stars. Love between two people could go on and on, but if one hurt the other it was like taking a gourd of water out of the lagoon, a small thing, but not nothing. A few cruel words and another gourd emptied away, a motion of the hand, a slap, carelessness of the other... Each small hurt was another gourd emptying into the ground. The lagoon seemed so huge, but it could be emptied so the fish were flapping among dry rocks. Could it be put back? She didn't know. Love could be diminished, little by little.

He'd leave. She could picture him standing on his boat, telling his men to sail away. She'd known he'd leave long before she ever touched him, but as she lay tired and alone in her hut, she felt the pain of it in her bones. He'd leave and he'd never come back. He'd sit in his cabin with his paintings on the walls like memories spread thin, without scent or taste. He'd look at his papers and books, but there'd be no one to touch him or make him happy. At night he'd lie in his hammock, swinging with the sea. Was that why sailors had hammocks – so they were held close at night? Even if it was only cloth, it must be some comfort – to be hugged tight, rocked by Hina of the Without.

When she woke in the morning, tears leaked down her cheeks and soaked into her mat. Hauata brought food but Atea didn't eat. Bowls of cold arrowroot, fish and po'ee were left untouched beside her mat. In the afternoon she sat outside the hut. Hauata joined her, silent beside her mother's sadness.

'When I heard about father I was fiu for a long while,' Hauata said. 'Nanihi let me lie in her hut.'

Atea took her hand. 'I'm sorry.'

'Anapa came and told us you were in the Oui-oui prison. Everyone thought you'd be killed. Even when my mouth stopped crying and my chest stopped sobbing,' Hauata said, 'tears came again every day. My body was tired out, sad all through – even my arms and legs, and my ears when I heard the music of Raiatea. My belly was too sad to be hungry.' Hauata leaned her shoulder against her mother. 'Nanihi said it's best to feel it and feel it and feel it, until one day it's different –'

'Nanihi is right,' Atea said. 'Has that day come yet?'

Hauata smoothed her pareo over her legs. Rows of small unfamiliar flowers covered her thighs. It was the cloth Temana gave her when she left.

'It's different now.'

Chapter 37

They'd be leaving Tahiti in two days, so the crew were hard at work stuffing the Salamander with produce. Henry stood on the quarterdeck and watched as baskets of coconuts and preserved breadfruit were roped up and over the sides to be stowed below. The ship was orderly on the surface at least; under the watchful eyes of the marines the men were stocking the orlop deck for the return voyage while he pondered whether Atea would come, and if so, how to handle that with the crew, Roberts and the other officers. He examined the occupants of each native canoe with a shred of hope as they approached, but none of them contained her beloved shape. There was plenty to last them beyond Hawaii, and still room for textiles and crafts to take home. Maybe mats and gourds would make Atea feel more at ease. Would she come, despite the unfortunate circumstances of their last meeting? Did she know how he loved her? And there was Hauata – would Atea leave her? He determined to go ashore again as soon as possible.

He could accommodate whatever she wanted. If she wanted to bring Hauata, so be it. In many ways it would be simpler if the girl stayed in Tahiti, but if not, he could handle the crew – and the Admiralty when they got back. At last he'd be able to see Elizabeth's grave. Maybe Atea shouldn't go ashore en route, for fear of disease – but she'd need to get proper clothes, to meet people... his thoughts hopped about from one thing to another as bouquets of flapping chickens were hauled up the sides, tied by their feet. They were carried below to be released into coops on the mess deck. Two days of ferrying and filling meant the barrels were full of fresh water. Old Groan and Roberts checked the stores as they arrived, while up above them Henry drummed his fingers on the rails as he watched the laborious loading. He had to apologize to Miri and Atea, to see Atea and find out if she'd decided. His orders were to leave immediately, but it was his decision - a few days wouldn't hurt, and the deserters hadn't been located yet.

Once most of the produce was stowed, Henry went to his quarters and got his bag. As he emerged, a slaughtered wild pig was carried past, slung on a stake carried by two sailors, followed by Roberts.

‘The gun room for this, Captain?’ Roberts asked.

Henry nodded. ‘Yes. Run it past cook first. It won’t last long anyway. One good roast dinner for all and a couple of stews.’ He saw Roberts’ eyes linger on the waterbag hanging from his shoulder. ‘I’m going ashore for a while.’

Roberts looked worried. ‘Not for long, sir, I hope?’

‘I’ll be back before sunset.’

*

Hauata was sitting outside Atea’s hut; she got up and walked down the beach to greet Henry as he approached.

‘Mother is inside. I’m going fishing.’

Henry nodded, impressed with her tact. It was hard to gauge how things were from her demeanour. She seemed as sturdy and pragmatic as ever; she looked at him with what seemed like detached curiosity. Had Atea talked with her about going away? They must know the ship would be leaving soon; the island grapevine was quick to circulate news.

Butterflies flickered in his stomach. Atea was likely to be angry, but she’d taught him that a man must be able to stand in the flame of his woman’s anger. She appeared at the doorway as he approached it. Framed by her mass of hair, her face was unsmiling, wary. She stood facing him, lingering on her threshold as if unwilling to leave its safety. Her hands joined together over her navel as she gazed at him, a gesture he recognised as protective. It wasn’t long since they’d met, he thought, but he’d got to know her so well. He began to speak before he reached her.

‘I’m so sorry - I had no need to go in the forest. I was wrong. Herenui told me to stay away. Where’s Miri? Is she all right? I’d like to tell her how sorry I am -’

He stopped a few feet away from her. Atea looked at him as if he were new to her, her eyebrows raised. It was the expression his mother used for naughty children and indolent servants. He'd never seen it on Atea's face before.

He held out his hand.

She didn't take it. Instead she gestured towards the fire circle outside her hut. 'Sit down, Henry.'

'Thank you,' he replied, sitting down on one of the logs around the fire. It felt oddly formal. He kept quiet, stopping himself from chattering into her silence.

Without any rush, she sat down beside him, smoothing her pareo over her knees. She was as calm as usual, but there was a new and disturbing coolness. She hadn't embraced him; she hadn't even touched him. But once he'd explained and apologised properly, he thought, she'd understand, and then perhaps they could talk about leaving. Still, her remoteness made him nervous. Awkwardly, he held out his hand again.

'I had to see you.'

She stared back at him. He'd never known her so detached. The butterflies in his guts flapped. He retracted his outstretched hand.

'You held your hand up to me.' She looked at his hand as if it were something she found hard to comprehend. 'I can't take it now as if nothing is wrong. Have you forgotten?'

'I'm sorry.' Henry folded his hands in his lap. 'I've come to tell you how sorry I am for that – and for yesterday.' The burial seemed such a long time ago. He'd have to explain that first. He shifted on his log, trying to settle into her way of doing things, despite his longing to touch her, to kiss her. Waiting for some sign that she would forgive him, he looked into her eyes. 'I'm sorry. I couldn't talk to you at the burial because of the men. They tried to take over the ship - they killed the boy we were burying, and Favour. They were angry I went away with you.' He sighed. 'It was not good to be friendly to you then, when we buried the boy.'

‘Not good’ was pathetic - it was impossible, foolhardy, reckless, but he couldn’t think of a Tahitian word for ‘impossible’ – was there one? Atea didn’t look impressed. Her mouth was an unfamiliar straight line, her lips pressed together.

‘You are tapitane. I know that, but you hurt me.’

‘Yes, I’m Captain. I didn’t want to be cold. I’m sorry.’ He shook his head. ‘It was difficult for me, all of that day. For many days. I’m sorry you were hurt.’ He watched her face, hoping for the stiffness to ease.

But Atea sat with her eyes downcast. She didn’t seem mollified.

‘And I’m sorry about the baby, too.’ He was blundering on, but he couldn’t help it.

Atea flicked grains of sand from her pareo.

‘I have work to do also,’ she said. ‘Birthing doesn’t wait. You wait for it. I have to go when I’m needed, stay until it’s finished.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I know you are.’ She glanced at him. ‘I can see it.’

Yet she looked sad and distant rather than relieved. They were so close he could smell her familiar scent of monoi. He longed to touch her, but her demeanour told him not to. Although it was agonising, he felt respect for her determination to get things right between them before granting the forgiveness he craved. Trust the body, she always said, and it didn’t feel right yet.

‘You can’t be at a birth,’ Atea continued. ‘It’s tapu.’

‘Yes, I see that now. I didn’t know. Herenui said, but I didn’t listen, and that was wrong - but I understand now. I’m so sorry I disturbed you and Miri.’

She looked up at him, her expression reminding him of the day she’d come to his cabin to be painted, her eyes liquid with sadness. Her eyes were so filled with emotion he thought they’d brim over with tears, but they held his gaze on and on and on. A lump rose in his throat as he looked back at her, trying to read what it was she wanted, what he could say to make it better.

Atea sighed. 'You know Herenui. You don't need to understand for yourself *before* you respect what he says.'

Henry nodded. 'I was going too fast, like you always say - looking for you - all I knew was that you were in the forest. I didn't know Miri was with you. I wanted to see you so much... I wanted to tell you why I couldn't speak to you at the burial. I wouldn't go into a place where a woman was - giving birth - at home. I know it's not a place for men - it's the same at home -'

His words trailed away. He couldn't make it better. He'd gone into a tapu place. Talking now didn't help.

'Aita. No Don't tell me it's the same. I don't know what the popa'a do, but you don't know how it is with us. The father is with the mother at the birth if he can; he holds his woman. He wants to help.' Atea sighed. 'Heremanu is back now. He was fishing, but he's with her now.'

Henry felt a surge of sympathy for Heremanu; his baby was dead.

'Sad news for him...'

Atea looked at him as if she didn't understand. Perhaps her sympathy was more with her friend.

Henry stumbled on. 'How is Miri?'

Atea frowned. 'She's resting. She's with Heremanu. Don't go to see her. She won't want to see you.'

He straightened his back. 'No, I promise. I wasn't thinking of it.' He paused. 'Is she very sad?'

Atea turned to him. 'Because you came into the forest?'

'Well, yes, but - because of the baby.'

She frowned at the ground. 'What do you mean?'

He hesitated. It was awkward to talk about dead babies. The memory of her holding it up, floppy as a doll, wouldn't go away.

He cleared his throat. 'Because it was born - dead.'

Atea didn't answer.

He pressed on. 'I mean, Miri will be mourning...'

Atea gazed at him steadily.

'She knew what had to be done. We made a pouara. She'll be *fiu* as long as she needs... And after that, another day, she can walk out in the sun, feel her life moving, feel the warmth on her skin. She's done what Taaroa asked.'

'Taaroa? But Heremanu is her husband ... I don't understand; did she - make love with another man?'

As soon as he'd blurted it out he regretted it. Atea tipped her head to the side with that slight frown that he'd come to recognise. She didn't seem offended so much as weary.

'Taaroa is our ancestor, the god who brought us to Tahiti. Remember? I told you about him bringing the ancestors across the sea in his canoe.' Her tone was patient. 'When he brought us to Tahiti, Taaroa told us how to live here. He said keep the first child, but not the seven born afterwards; they go to him. Don't you remember? I told you what he said about the piglets -' She shrugged, as if impatient that he didn't understand. 'Everyone knows it.'

Pushing his hands into his hair, Henry gazed at her. 'Piglets? Seven go to him? What do you mean?'

'Taaroa told the story of the piglets to show how the first can live, and after that the next seven must be given back - to him. So we can keep the first born child, but the next one must be given to him, and the next, and the next... It's hard, harder than anyone can know, but when the second baby is born, we give it to him as he asked. And the next, and the next, and the next - I told you. We can keep the ninth.'

'Seven.' He shook his head in disbelief. Was he being stupid? Seven babies 'given' to Taaroa? Surely he must have misunderstood, but the gravity of her expression made him anxious. Unease slid down his arms into his curled, empty hands. The hair around her face hid her eyes as she gazed at the ground. Her shoulders rose and fell with her deep breaths. 'And you... and you do that?'

‘We must respect him.’ She rubbed her thumbs together as she spoke. ‘If we don’t do as he asks, what will he do – bring more sickness, more death?’

Henry sat trying to take in what she was saying.

‘More than half our people have died since the popa’a came. There was no sickness like this before. We don’t want to make Taaroa angry – we want to please him.’ She rubbed her eyes.

Henry stared at her. A horrible thought entered his mind as her fingers dragged across her cheeks, across the tattooed letters. That word; it couldn’t be true, could it? There was her face the same as ever, but... His stomach clenched. He made himself say it out loud.

‘Are you saying that you – you killed that baby?’

‘Ah hia! No. No, I didn’t kill the baby.’

He pressed his face into his hands with relief. Thank God. It was a misunderstanding. How could he have thought that - of her? Atea was hunched beside him; she seemed to be bracing herself, as if he might strike her. Henry watched as her thumbs rubbed and rubbed. He had to understand.

‘Then - the baby was born dead? Is that what you’re saying?’

He waited for her answer, wanting to see her face relax.

‘No.’ She spoke quietly, but firmly. Her generous mouth was smaller than he’d ever seen it, pressed in on itself. ‘It wasn’t dead.’

‘It wasn’t dead.’ He said the words out loud, as if they’d help him. ‘The baby.’ All he could see in his mind was the baby hanging from her hands, its limbs swinging. He’d seen it himself. He shook his head as the answer rose to his mouth. ‘So – are you saying - Miri killed it? Miri killed her own baby?’

‘Yes.’ Atea’s body was still, hunched forward.

‘And you let her – you let her do that - ‘

He stumbled to his feet.

Atea didn’t move. She looked up at him, a greyish pallor in her cheeks, leaving the dark letters standing out.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Yes, Henry. I’m the kahuna for birth. You know that.’ Her voice was unsteady. ‘Yes, if the mother wants me to, I make the pouara. That’s what I have to do. Sometimes she can do it herself. Or if the father is there, he can. Miri’s baby took a long time to come, but he wasn’t dead. Miri put her thumbs to his neck. She gave him to Taaroa.’

‘She put her thumbs to its neck?’

Atea put her thumbs to her own throat, pressing them to her windpipe.

Henry shifted away from her. ‘She killed the baby? He was alive ...’

Atea wrapped her arms around herself. ‘Yes, Henry.’

‘I can’t believe you do that. You do that? How many? How many have you - *killed*? Or helped to *kill*?’

Atea bent her head; he couldn’t see her face as she answered.

‘For Miri? This is her fifth birth. I’ve been with her for the last three. My grandmother Puatea was there before, and Heremanu.’

Her hands flopped onto her lap. Had those thumbs really crushed the windpipes of newborn babes?

‘So Heremanu killed them - or you? Is that your work; killing babies? Is that what you learned from your grandmother?’

‘The pouara have to be given back. Someone does it, as quick as they can, before it cries out. Miri has her firstborn child already. The one she can keep.’

She meant yes, she killed them. Dull with shock, Henry heard his own voice form other questions.

‘And there are others? Other women? More than Miri? How many? How many babies have you killed?’

‘I look after women who need my help. Any woman. This is what I do. Why do you ask me this now?’

She drew up her legs, grasping her ankles. The tattooed word, upside down though it was, was blazoned across her face. He’d chosen to ignore it all this time. And there it was, plain as day: MURDERER.

‘You don’t even know, do you? *God in Heaven!* You don’t know how many babies you’ve killed!’ Horror tightened in his chest. He paced away, then back towards her, unable to keep still. ‘So it’s true - it’s true - your tattoo!’

Atea looked up at him.

‘What did you think would happen to our babies?’

Henry didn’t answer.

‘You were happy to love me, Henry - many times you loved me. Did you not think we might make a baby?’

Was she pregnant? The thought struck him like a blow, knocking the wind out of him. She could be. She could be carrying their child – his child. Cold sweat ran down his back. What would happen then? Was she taunting him? It was true, he hadn’t thought about that.

‘You’re not...?’

He could hardly speak. He couldn’t say it.

Atea put her hand on her belly.

‘No - I don’t feel it. I suppose popa’a babies feel the same...’

Momentarily he closed his eyes with relief.

‘Did you not think of it - Henry?’ There was silence as she waited for his answer, but Henry could only shake his head. ‘No. No. You were happy not to think of it. That was easier for you. And you can think of it now and call *me* bad - not you. Don’t think it’s so easy for us! Did you not think of it when we made all the loving?’

He opened his mouth but no words came out. She was right. He hadn’t considered it. He’d been too bound up in loving her, in his own sensations, his grief for Eliza, his longing for her, for comfort. His anger drained into the sand, leaving a huge heaviness inside him.

‘Why did you hold your hand up to me?’ Atea’s voice grew stronger. ‘When you buried the man in the box? Your men were hurt, but you made them dig when they were sick enough to die. You hurt your own men, who have come here with you, you torture them with digging in the hot sun when their skin is open on their backs! Why did you do that?’

You can kill them. When you do something I don't like, I try to understand - that you are tapitane, that your ways are different ... But when I do something you don't understand, to you I am bad. Just bad.'

Henry stared at his boots, barely able to absorb her question. She was his Atea, and she was no longer his Atea at all.

He took a deep breath.

'I told you. The men almost took my ship so I had to show my *mana*, show I was strong. I had to do it. I couldn't be close with you in front of them – not even to talk - it was too dangerous. That's why I held up my hand.'

What did it matter, compared to murdering babies?

Atea thrust her hands into the sand, pushing herself to her feet. 'You turned me away! I was afraid for you when we left you at your ship. It was a long while for me to wait with no news - then you came with the box, and I was so happy to see you weren't hurt - but you were cold – and you looked like a bad man, letting your men be tortured. You didn't think how long I waited, how afraid I was for you.'

'That's why I came to find you in the forest - to tell you -' He felt heavy as lead down to his soles. 'I hoped you might come with me. That's why I came. I wanted to ask you...'

He couldn't finish the sentence. He felt defeated. There she was, the woman that he'd so wanted to take home. Her hands were planted on her hips, and her stance reminded him of the first time they'd met Miri, a raving, uncontrolled virago. He remembered the distaste on Roberts' face. And he'd imagined Atea coming home with him, meeting his mother, his sister, coming with him to Eliza's grave. Now he realised that was impossible, risible. How could he have thought it? Suddenly he saw Atea as perhaps Roberts saw her; a native woman standing before him in a worn pareo. Yes, she was voluptuous, beguiling, beautiful, but she was also unfathomable. Roberts was right. He'd never be able to understand her.

'I wanted to be with you,' Atea said. 'Ah hia, Henry. I wanted to -'

Yet the emotion in her voice reached into him - she was still his Atea too; he couldn't help the rush of sympathy as he saw her eyes shining with tears.

'Atea, I came to ask you to come with me - on my ship. Now I know you can't, but I wanted you to.'

Tears gathered in her eyelashes and slid down her cheeks. Silver lines jagged and bent into the tattooed letters. Whatever he thought about her, she was suffering as he was. With a sense of exhaustion, he felt his own stupidity. His duty as captain, her duty as midwife. Not the same, but hopeless to explain. Along with the hopelessness and the outrage, he couldn't help feeling for her.

He went to where his bag lay on the ground. 'I brought you these.' He pulled out the bundle wrapped in cloth and held it out. 'I don't know if they're the ones...'

Atea took the bundle and opened it, looking confused. She pulled the cloth open until two wooden faces appeared. Their shell eyes glinted in the sun.

Henry watched her. 'Governor Bruat had them. Are they the right ones?'

Her face was intent as she unwrapped them fully. The boy, and then the girl. Her fingers traced their contours, examining them with rapt attention. This was so different to the scene he'd pictured so fondly, twisted with the knowledge of what she'd done. Had she killed the babies represented by these pouara? Or allowed Temana to kill them? With incomprehensible tenderness, she touched the hands and feet, then put her lips to each small head in turn. They were about half the size of new babies, fitting into the curve of her arms. She swayed her hips as she cradled them. Her motherly response was disturbing. Her face was soft as she glanced up at him, then back at them.

'Yes, they're mine.' Her voice was choked with emotion. 'Thank you, Henry. You are a good man. I know you are good.'

Henry swallowed, straightening his back. 'The Governor has many carvings. I asked for them as a parting gift because they are yours ...'

'Thank you.' She gazed at the pouara cradled in the crook of her arm, and back at him. 'I love you. Thank you.'

He stood in front of her, pushing the toe of his boot into the sand, making a dent. 'I wish – I wish things were different.' He slid his foot back across the sand, smoothing it out. 'But they're not.'

Chapter 38

Once back on board, Henry sat in his quarters, dull with shock. Atea was lost to him. He stared at the paintings he'd pinned back on the walls. What she'd said when she saw them was right; they were pale ghosts that couldn't show the blood and guts of life on the island. He thought of the warriors wearing smashed corpses over their heads like cloaks. His watercolour of a line of natives carrying umbrellas in the rain was sweet, almost Japanese in effect, but somehow it was a patronising joke. His sketch of King Tapoa of Bora Bora paddling with his trousers rolled up was meant affectionately, but now he saw how the paintings revealed his superficiality. They were trinkets, like the tawdry mirrors they'd brought to use in trading with the Tahitians. He hadn't seen what was going on under his nose.

Roberts knocked and came in.

'Sir, the deserters have been found.'

Henry nodded. 'Good. Alive?'

Roberts looked disappointed by his lack of enthusiasm, but Henry couldn't summon up any more energy.

'Yes, they're all alive, thankfully.' Roberts went on. 'They were up at the mountain camp. It was routed by the French yesterday – a clean-up, Brouat said.'

Henry said nothing, so Roberts pressed on. 'Dozens of Tahitians killed, apparently, but only a few French casualties.'

Henry imagined slain warriors left to rot among burning huts, unable to feel any triumph at this defeat. He remembered his welcome at the camp, and wondered if the men he'd met had survived. They'd been clear that fighting to the last was an obligation; their honour was at stake. Perhaps some were Atea's relatives.

'Pointless losses in pursuit of the inevitable.' Henry looked up at Roberts' concerned face, and tried, wearily, to elaborate. 'It was always a French victory, wasn't it? In the end,

even the bravest warriors have no chance against guns. And yes, I know we'd have done the same.'

Roberts stood still, apparently nonplussed.

Henry sighed. 'How are our deserters?'

His own men would have been roped up and driven like cattle back down through the forest. How would she view that?

'They'll be brought back to the ship tomorrow, on French boats. How will you punish them, Sir?'

Henry wondered why Roberts was asking – did he fear his judgement was compromised? They both knew there was a practical limit to how many men could be kept in irons for the length of the journey back. She would find such punishment of his own men incomprehensible, like the flogged men burying Brooks that had so shocked her. He made his response concise and clear, to show Roberts he was still capable of intelligent thought.

'I'll frighten them with the death sentence for mutiny, then I'll tell them that instead I'm judging them on their unwillingness to join a mutiny rather than their alacrity in jumping ship. If they can explain themselves suitably, they can work the passage back; there's no point in keeping them all in irons. Further decisions will be made by the Admiralty on their return, but I'll insist on an impeccable record on the journey home to aid their case. They'll escape a flogging if they're compliant, and they'll know how fortunate they've been.'

He couldn't help feeling some sympathy for them. The escapees were those who'd wanted to stay in paradise, whatever the cost. But did they know what would happen to the babies their Tahitian sweethearts might have, he wondered. Had they understood the horrors of that? Their midwife was a murderer.

As he gave further orders, he felt detached, hollow. He watched Roberts' face as they talked through necessary supplies for the journey, noticing how keen he was to leave. When Roberts went below to make a final check with Old Groan, Henry wrote a cursory letter to Bruat thanking him for his help in returning the deserters. The usual etiquette was that he'd make a farewell visit, but he couldn't bear to go to shore again. His previous visit

to the Governor would have to be his last. If he happened to see Atea, how could he stroll past to take tea with Bruat and his wife? His heart was torn out of his chest.

Instead, he took down all the paintings he'd pinned up around his quarters. Although he hoped it would make the room less painful, it just felt emptier. He didn't want to look at Tapoa holding a bouquet of fish, or Miri smiling and smoking her pipe. They came from another time, before he understood. Ghastly daubings. He grabbed a sketch of Bruat with a trumpet instead of a nose, and tore it across. One by one, he ripped up landscapes, tattooed warriors, Hauata dancing. As he destroyed the views from Vane's hut, sobs caught in his throat. Torn bits of his pastel-coloured Tahiti patched the boards at his feet. Last of all, he took down the painting of Atea he'd rescued from the floor after the mutiny. How awkward she looked – shy and preoccupied. Her huge beseeching eyes disarmed him once again. Tenderly, he traced the line of her jaw, the curve of her soft neck. He'd loved to kiss her there. He'd caught the warmth of her expression even then, the entreaty in it. His fingers stroked the contour of her cheeks, then pulled back as if stung. The tattooed word screamed at him. Murderer. The letters were stamped across her face. His stupidity howled back at him.

All those babies murdered.

No decent person could accept that. The missionaries offered the chance to repent, to be forgiven. But they'd continued. His hands shook as he held her image. How many innocents? Tahitians had been doing it for generations – but now they could stop. Looking at her demure, earnest face, he still found it almost impossible to believe. She'd helped parents to kill their babies, and killed her own precious children too. Damn her. Damn her to Hell.

He ripped across the tattooed MURDERER. Damn her. Weeping with fury, he ripped across her face again and again. Pieces of painted paper scattered around his feet. Resisting the urge to stamp on them like a child, he wiped his face on his sleeves, scooped the scraps into a cloth, and marched up to the quarterdeck. He was so angry he didn't care who saw him shake them out overboard. The thick watercolour paper spread out on the surface of the sea like petals, slowly absorbing moisture before sinking.

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When he gave the order to sail next morning the brusque clip of his own words sounded forced. The wind wasn't good, but he couldn't bear to wait any longer, watching every canoe that approached to see who was in it. The activity on the decks below felt ant-like, distant, but he had to play his part, however inept. He stood on the quarterdeck facing Tahiti, straight as a ramrod, the determined leader. His jacket was too tight, and his shirt constricted his neck. As he pulled at his collar, he felt as if he were being choked. A gun salute sounded in farewell. Henry nodded to Roberts to order the return salute.

Once the rumble of guns had faded away, he ordered his men to weigh anchor. As they trudged round the capstan, winding in the dripping rope, they sang mournfully, in time with their plodding steps. Henry's face was blank as he paced around the quarterdeck. It had never felt so much like a cage.

As the ship began to move across the harbour, Henry gazed back at the island. The sky was as blue as on any other afternoon. Clouds loitered over Mount Aorai's misty peak, while a long cascade made a white gash in the green forest covering its slopes. He couldn't help remembering how Atea had talked about the mists of sadness around the mountains, about the gentle rain of misery. She'd spoken of letting the rain soak in, letting the pain seep through. It had made sense in the days after the news of Eliza's death. Trust the body, she always said. Now pain was lodged in his chest, heavy as a plumb weight. Whatever he thought, it hurt to leave her.

As the Salamander began to move, loaded down with produce, Roberts came to stand beside him in tactful silence. He had the careful instincts of an Englishman – he was as unwilling to disturb an emotional difficulty as to prod at a wasps nest. Henry was grateful for his diplomacy. Roberts directed the men as the sails were raised, while Henry stood on deck, merely being captain.

As they inched towards the gap in the reef Henry realised he was still looking for her, scanning the few canoes around the ship to see if a woman was paddling, or perhaps a woman and a girl... How foolish he was. He turned and gazed up at the crow's nest. What was the matter with him? All of his experience and upbringing told him she was evil, yet even after all she'd done, he still couldn't understand her as that. He remembered her bent over his feet, and knew his heart believed in her goodness.

*

Cannon fire rolled around the mountains, and Atea knew the Oui-ouis were saying goodbye to Henry's ship. The sound rumbled like great stones grinding together, grinding in her stomach. Hauata looked at her.

‘Henry is leaving,’ Atea said. ‘I need to see.’

She set off along the shore towards Vane's house. Hauata ran after her, walking beside her mother, sliding her feet through the shallows.

‘It's all right, Hauata. I'll go alone.’ Atea touched her arm. ‘I have to see his ship leave. I'll be back in a while.’

‘I can come with you if you want – I don't mind.’ But she looked relieved.

‘No, I want to make ho'oponopono. You stay here.’

Hauata pressed the side of her face against her mother's shoulder, then turned back towards their hut.

Atea walked on, her feet pushing into wet sand, thinking of the pouara he'd brought back to her. Now they were hidden in the forest, safe. Her footsteps filled with seawater, puddled and shining when she glanced back. He didn't understand how making pouara was terrible and necessary. Taaroa's wish had to be honoured. He didn't know the strength it took to do as Taaroa wished. The strength to kill your own heart and still live.

When she reached Vane's empty house, her face was wet with tears. She dragged herself down to the edge to the sea, staring across the lagoon as his ship came into view, slowly making for the break in the reef. When she saw it moving, she fell to her knees. Henry was leaving her, even though he knew she loved him.

He'd never come back in the rowing boat with his boots and his shy smile. He'd never come to her again. She collapsed in the sand, sobbing as she watched the white sails edge towards the reef, broken with sorrow. She ground her face into the black grit of the beach, rubbing it across her cheeks. He hated what was marked there, but surely he knew that wasn't all she was...

Pushing her hands into the wet sand, she raised herself up. The ship was no closer to the reef. Perhaps he wasn't going to leave! She raised herself higher, suddenly filled with hope. Flinging her hair back out of her face, she sat up, resting her hands on her belly. They had loved each other. If she had his child, it would be the first child between them. She could keep it.

Chapter 39

The sound of the sails flapping told Henry the wind was flagging. He looked up at the pennants on the mast drooping. The ship was barely moving. The breeze on his cheek was intermittent, weak.

Roberts looked across the deck at him. ‘Not too promising...’ He got out his handkerchief, mopping at his face, looking crestfallen.

But Henry’s heart leapt. He could give the order to turn back, see her again. A powerful longing surged through him, drawing him back to shore. He turned towards Tahiti again, grasping the rails. The shining wake was like a pathway. He could swim that far, he thought desperately, drag himself out of the waves to find her. Where would she be? Watching from the beach? He could almost feel her in his arms, warm and substantial, clinging to him, shaking with emotion. He could bury his face in her hair, drink in the scent of monoi. She’d opened him up to feeling when he’d been closed as an oyster, allowed him to be the man he wanted to be. Loving her had been so natural, had given him such unimagined pleasures.

Roberts came and stood beside him.

‘It’ll pick up, won’t it.’ He didn’t sound so sure.

Henry could make out the bay where Vane’s hut nestled under tall palms. Roberts followed the direction of his gaze.

‘Some things are just beyond the pale,’ he said. ‘What she did, Sir, that’s simply – ‘ He shook his head sadly. He couldn’t even name it.

Henry knew Roberts was right, but he couldn’t hold back his response.

‘She believed she was doing her duty.’ His voice sounded shaky. The pit of his stomach had turned to water.

‘I know, Sir. That’s what’s so dreadful.’

Atea had understood the penalties for pleasure, and she'd lived with that unavoidable fact, while he'd been heedless, rash. If he judged her, he should judge himself as harshly. His upbringing told him she was immoral, wicked – yet she was also so kind and loving, so tender...

Henry shook his head, as if to rid himself of such weak thoughts. He'd neglected his duties, put the ship and the lives of men in jeopardy. Men had died. He hadn't even thought of a possible child. He'd thought the Tahitians naïve, but how naïve had he been? He looked back at Tahiti, hot with shame. If she did have his child, she would murder it.

'Look now, it's picking up again.'

Roberts took his arm, almost physically turning him. Creamy sailcloth flapped and bulged. Roberts began to shout orders beside him while Henry stared into the filling mainsail.

Waves threw themselves against the reef, spraying the decks as the ship eased between the rocks. He'd spent so many hours watching waves break on the reef with Atea. Was she watching them leave? Henry turned back towards the island. The smooth path of the wake led back across the turquoise lagoon, shining silver. He had to leave. Of course Roberts was right, but the pull was torturous. She was there on her island, so close. And he'd never see her again.

The sea breeze blew across his face, flapping at his shirt. Sailors lined the rails, looking back, while others sat up in the rigging. They were so quiet only the creak of ropes could be heard. He wasn't the only one feeling the pull of Tahiti. It was as if the ship was filled with an invisible cargo – longing. As they slid through the reef, Henry felt as if the wake still connected him to Atea.

Every breath stretched back over the water.

*

She watched his ship slip through the reef, and out onto the open sea. More sails dropped down. They were really leaving.

With tears streaming down her face, Atea knelt in the sand. She had to make ho'oponopono, to let him go. Filled with longing, she felt the bonds of love joining her to the faraway ship. They stretched out like silvery cords across the sea, as she thought of all the moments of happiness with Henry, sitting beside him through the quiet days, washing and swimming together in the lagoon, loving each other, feeling his arms around her in the cool nights under the stars. Her eyes fixed on his ship, her heart yearning across the water. She didn't want to let him go, but she must try. Just for now.

Ho'oponopono. To make good, to make good. To let him go, even though she didn't want him to leave. She straightened her back, willing herself to release him, for his sake. Above her head she made a spinning blade, then whirled it down around her body, cutting through the bonds of love joining her to him, cutting, cutting, whirling around and around. He'd loved her when she felt she couldn't be loved again. He'd given her back her beauty. And she'd loved him dearly. He was brave enough to show himself in pain. How could she blame him for not understanding? There was so much she didn't understand. She cut through the bonds, around and around her body, down to her feet.

Again and again love kept streaming out, shining cords reaching out towards him across the sea. Her longing kept returning as more tears slid down her face. She wiped them away, feeling the ridges of her tattoo under her fingertips. Again and again the terrible pull of it came back, dragging at her. But she had to keep going, to help him, to help her. She stood up, cutting, cutting, spinning the blade, then pulling the cords back into herself. At last all were cut, and she bent her head, releasing him, letting him float away, wishing him well. Ho'oponopono.

The wake grew wider and smoother as it merged with the sea. The masts shrank until they were twigs. The pale blur of the ship flickered towards the horizon like the moth Puatea saw long ago, when the first ship came. As Atea watched, she couldn't help bending

forwards, arms wrapped around her belly, still drawn towards him. Her eyes strained at the moth shrinking between ocean and sky.

The End

The Stranger Within

Critical Commentary

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If we lie about the past, forcing it to tell a story we want it to tell, to mean what we want it to mean, it loses its reality and becomes a fake.

Ursula Le Guin, from the Foreword to *Tales from Earthsea*¹

Chapter 1 - Introduction

This thesis is a comparative analysis of Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* and my novel, *Heaven on Earth*.² The focus is narrow to enable a detailed examination of the writerly techniques that have been used in these two historical novels, looking at the problems and effects of these authorial choices in a context that may be useful to other writers in this field. I hoped to consider the problem for writers of representation of differing cultures. My intention was to examine Grenville's approach to representing indigenous people in *The Secret River*, and to compare her approach with mine in *Heaven on Earth*.³ There are risks, gains and losses in Grenville's strategies as a writer and in mine.

I chose Grenville's novel for several reasons. Firstly, it was a pleasure to read and study; she is a descriptive, tactile and visual writer. The two novels are set in Australia and Tahiti during the nineteenth century, and both feature native and European characters. Although these locations are very different, I have not discovered a contemporary historical novel set in Tahiti that I could use as a closer comparator. This is not a study of the two very different colonial situations, nor a comparison of the treatment of indigenous people, nor of treatment by colonisers, nor of two very different indigenous cultures. I am not comparing the process of colonisation, nor different sets of colonised relationships, nor the historical 'people' involved, but examining the approaches of two different writers to their material. This is a writer-practitioner's study of approaches to writing historical novels. Grenville and I present our stories in very different ways.

Both our novels attempt to rise to the challenge of representing indigenous people.

1. Ursula Le Guin, *Tales from Earthsea* (London: Orion, 2002) xii.

2. Kate Grenville, *The Secret River* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006). (All subsequent references to *The Secret River* will be cited as 'Grenville').

3. Current practice in Australia is to capitalise the term 'Indigenous', but for consistency's sake I do not capitalise in this thesis, as I also use the term more generally, descriptively and in reference to other indigenous people like Tahitians and Maoris.

This is especially problematic considering the dearth of documentary material from Australian indigenous people and Tahitians for this era. Any records of their ceremonies, behaviour, beliefs and preferences are mediated by Europeans - missionaries, official and private individuals - with their own agendas and attitudes, and often unconscious cultural frames of reference. Both Grenville and I are privileged white women, writing from another century. Grenville's novel has featured in an ongoing public and academic debate about representations of Australian history. It has been classified as a 'revisionist history of contact between the early colonists and Aboriginal people...raising questions of identity and belonging, and writing the violence back into the story.'⁴ It has also been criticised for reinforcing a colonial discourse and a view of history as manifest, inevitable destiny. As Staniforth asserts, 'her focus on the convict domestic, far from destabilising and undermining traditional settler narratives, helps to reinforce them...all serve to reinscribe rather than rewrite the narratives of white legitimacy, and in doing so undercut Grenville's commitment to the work of reconciliation.'⁵ The criticisms levelled at her will be examined in more detail later. Nonetheless, 'in the canon of Australian literature, Kate Grenville gets a respected and respectable place'.⁶ The main bones of contention with her trilogy, especially *The Secret River*, appear to be the depiction of indigenous people and the dominant settler narrative.⁷ '*The Secret River* never pontificates or urges universalisation...but it is hard not to think the novel limns the cost of Australia's conversion into an English-speaking, mostly white modern state.'⁸ This problematic challenge is important both in terms of a society and nation's self image and orientation to political problems, and in practical and philosophical terms for writers, especially historical writers choosing material within colonial and

4. Amanda Crawford, 'The Secret River by Kate Grenville'. *Labour History*, No 90, May 2006. 236.

5. Martin Staniforth, 'Depicting the Colonial Home: Representations of the Domestic in Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* and Sarah Thornhill'. *JASAL*. No 13-2, 2013. 9.

6. Peter Pierce, 'Australian Literature since Patrick White'. *World Literature Today*, Vol 67, No 3, 1993. 515-518. Also see reviews by Carolyn Bliss, 'Joan Makes History' *World Literature Today*, Vol 63, No 3, Summer, 1989; and Natalie Quinlivan, "Grenville's significance lies in her engagement with political, historical, academic and everyday Australia." 'Quinlivan on Kossew's *Lighting Dark Places*' *JASAL*, 11:2. (2011) 4.

7. Odette Kelada's article is especially useful here, examining 'representations of race in *The Secret River* to contribute to such discussions of literary texts as manifestations of cultural territories, which generate power relationships consistent with the places and times of their production' 'The Stolen River: Possession and Race Representation in Grenville's Colonial Narrative', *JASAL* 10, 2010. 1-15.

8. Merritt Moseley, 'Tidy and Untidy Novels: The Booker Prizes 2006-2007.' *The Sewanee Review*, Vol 116, No 2 (Spring 2008). 289-303.

postcolonial eras. Usefully, Grenville has also published a companion volume detailing the story behind writing this novel, titled *Searching for the Secret River*.⁹ This volume made it easier to examine and compare her motivations, attitude and declared thoughts on writing *The Secret River*, as well as consulting her interviews, seminars and articles.¹⁰ Clearly, a writer does more than documentary research.¹¹ The difficulties of creating credible characters and scenarios within a historical context that faced Grenville in writing *The Secret River* were similar to those I experienced in writing *Heaven on Earth*. However, our technical approach is different. Given the lack of documentary material, and the existence of mediated and contested sources, a writer has to find ways of occupying the imaginative space of characters so apparently different to oneself. This is fraught with difficulty, and disputed territory in terms of postcolonial criticism, which shall be visited in more detail later. Bakhtin claims the historical novel as a site of ‘ceaseless reply’, and as a genre that is ‘ever questing and subjecting its established forms to review’.¹² It’s not possible in the context of mediated or missing history, where there are no survivors to consult, to ascertain that one has got it right, except that it may or may not work well enough for the purposes of the novel. ‘The novel resists, strenuously if not always successfully, alignment with the monological voices of politics, the media and official histories.’¹³ Nonetheless, the potential for ‘getting it

9. Kate Grenville, *Searching for the Secret River* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007).

10. For example, see her interview with Ramona Koval, ‘Books and Writing’ ABC Radio National, Melbourne. 8th Jan 2006. www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwritng/stories/sl522708. See also Kate Grenville ‘The Novelist as Barbarian’ seminar: Challenging Australian History: Discovering New Narratives. Canberra: National Library, 14-15 April 2000: Grenville ‘Unsettling the Settler; History, Culture, Race and the Australian Self.’ Australian Psychoanalytic Society Annual Conference, 22nd July, 2006. First accessed 09.10.10. Also published in online journal *Psychoanalysis Downunder* 2006. See also “Artists and Climate Change.” 18.08.11. and “The History-Fiction Demarcation Dispute.” 19.10.2009. www.kategrenville.com.

11. Anica Boulanger-Mashberg examines *Searching for the Secret River* as a useful paratext and epitext that is part of Grenville’s ‘extensive public commentary beyond... commercial norm’, in which the textualised character ‘Kate Grenville’ quests to ‘locate her present and her identity’, ‘fraught with postcolonial anxiety and coloniser guilt.’ ‘In her Own Margins: Kate Grenville’s *Searching for the Secret River* as marginalia to *The Secret River*’, *Limina*, Vol 15, 2009. 1-9. See also Elizabeth McMahon, ‘Author! Author! The Two Faces of Kate Grenville,’ in Sue Kossew, Ed., *Lighting Dark Places: Essays on Kate Grenville* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011).

12. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). 39.

13. Amanda Johnson, ‘Archival Salvage: History’s Reef and the Wreck of the Historical Novel’, *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature Special Issue*:

wrong' is immense, and the possibility of causing offence gives more than pause for thought. As well as supporting structures of oppression, writers can find themselves under personal attack, or damaging critical attack. Salman Rushdie and William Styron are examples of such vilification. Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* generated powerful negative reactions from black communities and scholars because of his portrayal of his black protagonist and his manipulation of historical 'facts'.¹⁴ How writers can represent the 'other' is a key question in this work. However, the overall focus here is on the detail of the technical choices of two writers, and the effect of those choices.

Grenville and I chose different approaches to the problem of representing the 'native'. Her choice not to enter an indigenous point of view in *The Secret River* is not necessarily the choice she makes in other works. Several of her previous novels employ the point of view of the neglected, the undocumented, the overlooked, those who are 'outside' society, including a few indigenous characters, so this may be more of an ethical and political decision than a technical one. In *Heaven on Earth*, I attempt to employ an indigenous perspective, although keen not to cause offence to Tahitians, while nonetheless aware that in entering the point of view of a nineteenth-century Tahitian woman I was certain to make mistakes. It remains a risk, and not one I took lightly. However, both Grenville and I live in a multicultural environment – and the colonial context we've chosen is one in which people of extremely different cultural mores encountered one another, and began a process of communication, misunderstanding and attempted mutual understanding that continues to this day. For Grenville, the familial connection to the colonial process was more evident than in my case, but both of us live in societies imbued with that history and still affected by colonial and postcolonial mores. How we choose to represent our characters in their historical context seemed to be a worthwhile and timely issue to consider, as these decisions relate to how any modern writer can represent the multiple cultural perspectives we may encounter in contemporary life.

Therefore, how writers can represent 'the other' is an important question for contemporary writers. We should be able to depict the milieu in which people of different nations, races and cultures interact – both in contemporary and historical fiction. I don't believe writers should 'retreat' into the supposed safety of representing their 'own' culture, even if that were possible.¹⁵ Who may or may not be 'entitled' to depict this milieu is a

Archive Madness. Vol 11, No 1 (2011) 14.

14. John Clarke, *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (Boston: Beacon, 1972).

15. Linda Alcoff, 'The Problem of Speaking for Others', *Cultural Critique* (1991). 5-32. The

pertinent question.¹⁶ In Australia there is a lively and ongoing debate on the politics of the representation of indigenous people, which I cannot cover here in any depth, but links to postcolonial debates on ‘Otherness’, and includes the suppression, selection and elision of indigenous histories and literature, ‘Aboriginalism’ – which like ‘Orientalism’ reifies and objectifies the colonised and their cultures – simultaneously suppresses the ability of the colonised to speak their own reality.¹⁷ In Australia there have been attempts to create protocols for the representation of indigenous culture, individuals and things, seeking to protect authenticity by respecting customary laws or cultural obligations and ensuring that the appropriate context is given to cultural material.¹⁸ This ongoing discussion is useful, unfinished and cannot provide an effective *modus operandi* for the creative writer.¹⁹ Given my desire to write a story set in nineteenth-century Tahiti, I could have decided such a

choice to retreat is discussed further in the section on ‘Otherness’ below, but such an unrealistic retreat would make it impossible to represent my own multicultural family, or any colonial or postcolonial reality.

16. See Wendy Brady and Michelle Carey, ‘Talkin Up “Whiteness”: A Black and White Dialogue’, in John Docker & Gerhard Fischer, Eds., *Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand* (Sydney: University New South Wales Press, 2000); Jackie Huggins, ‘Always was, Always will be’, Michele Grossman, Ed., *Blacklines: Contemporary critical writing by Indigenous Australians* (Carlton: Melbourne UP, 2003); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1992); Meredith Green & Christopher Sonn, ‘Problematizing the Discourses of the Dominant: Whiteness and Reconciliation’, *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, Vol 16, 5. 379-395.

17. Bill Ashcroft, Owen Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, Eds., *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989), sets out discussion of a postcolonial approach relevant to the Australian context. See also Clare Bradford, *Reading Race: Aboriginality in Australian Children’s Literature* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 2001), detailing the production of ‘accounts’ by non-indigenous writers in which the indigenous subject becomes homogenized ‘Other’; Dolores Collellmir, ‘Australian Aboriginal Women Writers and the Process of Defining and Articulating Aboriginality’ in Elizabeth Russell, *Caught between Cultures: Women, Writing and Subjectivities* (New York: Rodopi, 2002), 53-75; and Anita Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala: To Talk Straight* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2011); which examines indigenous authorship, publishing and readership. For the indigenous writing their own reality, see Mudrooroo Narrogin’s collections *Writing From the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1990); and *The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli milli wangka* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1997). More on ‘Otherness’ below.

18. Written by indigenous legal advisor Terri Janke, *Writing Culture: Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Literature* (Strawberry Hills, NSW: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board for the Australian Council, 2002). 42.

19. Critics, anthropologists and historians have different aims than the creative writer. ‘Correctness’ of perspective and historical/cultural ‘facts’ cannot always be ascertained where evidence does not exist.

project was too fraught with difficulty and abandoned it, but I decided to ‘push the envelope’ despite the fact that the problem of causing offence scared me. In fact, my ongoing study of Tahitian history and culture, and Huna shamanism, has informed my life in ways that would not otherwise have happened, so I am grateful that I have had this opportunity to learn. It has strengthened and deepened my respect and admiration for Polynesian cultures, and I believe European ‘civilisation’ could learn a great deal from them.

The different decisions Grenville and I made about narrative perspective have a significant effect on the respective novels. In *The Secret River*, Grenville’s white characters are the main focus. They establish themselves in an unfamiliar landscape already inhabited by the ‘other’. The stakes for survival are high, and the relationship between settlers and indigenous people is threatened by ignorance and opposing needs. Her approach is similar to the treatment of the indigenous characters in Patrick White’s *Voss*, in which the crazy white explorer only meets ‘natives’ in a glancing way, as potentially dangerous but inherently inferior from his perspective – the only perspective represented throughout the novel.²⁰ In Grenville’s story, as I shall examine in detail later, indigenous people are presented throughout as yet another problem for the settlers, who have a variety of responses. Depicting only the settlers’ perspective leaves the missing perspective of the indigenous people to the modern readers’ imagination. The silence or absence thus produced fills with an assumed contemporary knowingness or response with regard to the ill-treatment of the indigenous people. Barbara Kingsolver has a similar approach in *The Poisonwood Bible* – contemporary readers are likely to supply the imagined response of the ‘native’ where the Congolese behaviour seems unreadable, unguessable.²¹ The thoughts we supply as modern readers may be telling, and also may be just the kind of reflection contemporary authors are hoping to provoke.

Other historical writers have supplied thoughts for their period characters more overtly. In *The Forest Lover*, Susan Vreeland remains firmly in the white perspective of her protagonist Emily Carr, yet depicts close and challenging relationships between her and a Squamish friend.²² The heroine is depicted as self-consciously realising some of her own

20. Patrick White, *Voss* (London: Penguin, 1981). However, the overall orientation of *Voss* stands in distinction to the reinforcement of heroic myths found in earlier historical novels, as examined by Susan Sheridan, ‘Historical Novels Challenging the National Story’, *History Australia*, Vol 8, No 2. (2011) 3.

21. Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999). Congolese character Mama Tataba’s response to Christian ritual is hinted at through the mediation of the child narrator, and later emerges as a practical objection to baptism (84-5 and 91-3.)

22. Susan Vreeland, *The Forest Lover* (London: Penguin, 2004) 332-3.

inherent racism, experiencing intense and uncomfortable responses to 'native' culture. Barry Unsworth also goes some way towards depicting a dawning self-awareness in his white protagonist in his novel *Sacred Hunger*, in which his main character experiences a trajectory from doctor on a slave ship to respectful lover of a black woman, living in a community that attempts to achieve racial equality.²³ Although Unsworth's black African characters point out the persistence of the 'superior' mindset of the hero in dialogue in many of the latter chapters, the reader never experiences their internal perspective. Instead, the reader is left to guess the undisclosed thoughts and feelings of the native characters. Using contrasting points of view, Jane Rogers in *Promised Lands* manages two narrative perspectives.²⁴ One is a reflective period character and the other uses a modern fictional 'author' and his wife. Thus Rogers neatly introduces both a contemporary liberal self-examination, plus a further layer of critique through the wife's acid observations on the 'author's' patronising desire to help her improve herself – as an Eastern European 'other' – along with his unconsciously 'superior' value judgements. Again, she doesn't enter the period indigenous perspective, but moves some way toward examining questions of cultural superiority and othering. David Malouf invents a creative solution in *Remembering Babylon* by depicting a white character who has 'gone native' in order to examine the difficulties and prejudices between the white and indigenous worlds.²⁵ Alan Garner used a similar device in *Strandloper*, a poetic novel in which the white English protagonist has comparable spiritual experiences in the context of English folk traditions and as an indigenous elder in Australia.²⁶ Some historical writers choose not to enter or represent the indigenous perspective, although the time and setting of their work might have suggested the presence of such characters.²⁷ However, the canon of historical writing has moved away from the inaccurate and stereotyped depictions of other cultures as typified in early works like Wilkie Collins' *Iolani, Or, Tahiti as It Was* towards more nuanced and self conscious approaches.²⁸

Representation of indigenous people by non-indigenous writers has been attempted in many different ways. Rose Tremain depicts a Maori character called Pare in her novel *The*

23. Barry Unsworth, *Sacred Hunger* (London, Penguin, 1992).

24. Jane Rogers, *Promised Lands* (London: Faber, 1995).

25. David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993).

26. Alan Garner, *Strandloper* (London: Harvill, 1997).

27. One example is Steph Penney, *The Tenderness of Wolves* (London: Quercus, 2006).

28. Wilkie Collins, *Iolani, Or, Tahiti as It Was* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999).

Colour, mostly set in nineteenth-century New Zealand.²⁹ This character communes with spirits, and believes that the white child in her charge has been harmed because she has offended the spirits.³⁰ Pare's perspective provides a contrasting interpretation to that of the English settlers, and keeps reappearing as she influences the white child in his thinking about spirits and causality.³¹ She is depicted as marginal and afraid of the white people, indicating their power relative to the Maoris.³² In the same novel, Tremain also depicts a Chinese character – Chen Pao Yi - whose cultural perspective is also depicted as distinct to that of the European settlers, concerned with filial duty, listening to his dreams and the spirit-like voices of the relatives left behind in China.³³ Again, his perspective is a minor glimpse that uses several European stereotypes regarding Chinese people (familial and filial duty, bound feet, reverence towards ancestors), perhaps intentionally. The character challenges these stereotypes as the story progresses. Tremain's approach is nuanced yet modest, and her main focus remains on the activities and thoughts of the white settlers.

In her novel about the slave trade, *A Respectable Trade*, Philippa Gregory depicts a sexual relationship between a white woman and a man of another culture – her African slave.³⁴ The slaves' perspective is represented throughout, and conversations between slaves reveal their range of spiritual and cultural mores, which are not represented as homogenous, but as a contrast to the white range of perspectives. For instance, she depicts a raped slave woman speaking to the main slave character Mehuru in his capacity as 'obalawa', priest, requesting that he wishes her dead, which he does, and she dies.³⁵ Although I am no expert on historical African spirit systems, much of the slave perspective felt reasonably convincing, but the relationship between the white slave owner's wife and Meheru did not seem credible. My understanding of the period and its mores, and the specifics of the relationship made this fiction implausible.³⁶ As a white Australian writer depicting an

29. Rose Tremain, *The Colour* (London: Chatto, 2002).

30. Tremain, *The Colour* 66-67.

31. Tremain, *The Colour* 226-7.

32. 'Te riri pakeha: the white man's anger... had damaged her life...She knew there was no limit to the things this anger could do.' Tremain 243.

33. Tremain, *The Colour* . 189 and 251.

34. Philippa Gregory, *A Respectable Trade* (London: HarperCollins, 1996).

35. Gregory 188-191.

36. 'Historical reflection deals in the plausible rather than in the true.' Hayden White. *The*

indigenous character, Thomas Keneally has been criticised for ‘re-circulating stereotypes of caste in his attempt to portray an Aboriginal hero’.³⁷ Keneally’s novel uses an omniscient narrator, so the ‘other’ has a limited subjectivity, filtered through the superior understanding of the narrator. Keneally depicts an indigenous man killing unarmed white settlers, including women, comparable to the way Styron’s *Confessions of Nat Turner* depicts a black man killing white people in domestic environments, including women. Suggesting an interesting causal relationship between novelists and historians, Styron has implied that the debate caused by this novel may have helped prompt historical research into black uprisings in America.³⁸ During the seventies and eighties Australian historians began research that would re-shape understanding of convictism and indigenous dispossession, and Australian novelists shared the revisionary return to these subjects, revealing ‘a desire to use history to illuminate contemporary culture’ and to challenge former silences.³⁹

White novelists have variously tried to represent indigenous and black characters employing different techniques and sensibilities, and these attempts have changed over time.⁴⁰ I agree with Clendinnan (who has critiqued Grenville for her approach and her sometimes playful attitude to research) on one point at least – that Grenville’s decision not to ventriloquise indigenous dialogue in *The Secret River* ‘reveals a contemporary delicacy of mind’, while Grenville’s reluctance contrasts interestingly with her willingness to enter the point of view of early nineteenth-century Britons.⁴¹ Contemporary historical novelists have access to further techniques like the use of polyphonic voices, and may use code-breaking narrative techniques such as those employed by Kim Scott in *Benang*, creating proliferations

Content of the Form; Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1987) 94.

37. See Henry Reynolds, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (Sydney: Currency Press & Australian Film Commission, 2008) 26; and Thomas Keneally, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (Sydney: Times House Publishing, 1987).

38. William Styron, *This Quiet Dust and Other Writings* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993).

39. Sheridan, ‘Historical Novels Challenging the National Story’, *History Australia* (2011) 6-7.

40. As set out by Sheridan re Australian novelists in ‘Historical Novels Challenging the National Story’, *History Australia* (2011).

41. Inga Clendinnen, ‘The History Question: Who Owns History?’. *Quarterly Essay* (23) 2006. However, Adam Gall notes that Clendinnan’s flattening of the differences between British and indigenous agents so both are epistemologically remote in the same way is inadequate, and by attending to this limit Grenville does attempt to address the ethical and political. Adam Gall, ‘Taking/Taking Up: Recognition and the Frontier in Grenville’s *The Secret River*.’ *JASAL Special Issue 2008: The Colonial Present*. 99-100.

and confusions of semiotic meaning.⁴² Many critics seem to have overlooked the fact that Grenville did enter the perspective of an indigenous woman (rather awkwardly) in *Joan Makes History*, which I discuss below.⁴³ Grenville has used playful techniques in other works, and in some respects *The Secret River* uses quite a 'conventional' approach as a historical novel. Flanagan has expressed concern about a 'collective loss of nerve' among novelists regarding the bold use of narrative techniques that reframe archival research, but perhaps this is not surprising considering criticism that has been directed at some novelists for boldness.⁴⁴

In Grenville's novel and my own, cultural differences are key, but as writers we take distinct approaches. Having researched documentary evidence, Grenville wrote many of her scenes from the starting point of recorded historical events and interactions, as did I.⁴⁵ But historical records are as tricky and malleable a starting point as the writer's imagination. The needs and logic of the story also come to bear on the development of scenes and characters. In *Heaven on Earth*, I did not enter the point of view of a Tahitian character lightly, and my underlying belief is that if I claimed to be unable to put myself in the position of another person because of their race or ethnicity, I would be denying their humanity. There is an inherent danger in the notion that people of other races or ethnicities are so different, so 'exotic' that they are incomprehensible, and therefore 'othered' as too difficult to represent.⁴⁶ As writers, we need to depict cross-cultural interaction in order to represent our own social milieu. I shall examine different approaches to entering different perspectives in detail in the critiques below.

Kate Grenville began her research process with family history. She researched the story of her direct ancestor Solomon Wiseman. Then she moved away from the restrictions of his 'story' to the greater freedom of a fictional plot.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, she researched

42. Kim Scott, *Benang* (Sydney: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999). See also Kim Scott, *That Deadman Dance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

43. As Johnson claims, 'Carey, Grenville and Scott can be considered exponents of postcolonial polyphony, creating texts that differently evoke a discursive social, cultural and historical intertextuality.' Archival Salvage: History's Reef and the Wreck of the Historical Novel' *JASAL* (2011). 14. Kate Grenville, *Joan Makes History* (London: Minerva, 1989).

44. Richard Flanagan, *Gould's Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish* (Sydney: Picador, 2001).

45. Grenville (2007) 18-26.

46. More discussion of this follows below in the Ethical Issues chapter.

47. Grenville, *Searching for the Secret River* 180-181.

historical records and used many documented incidents as the basis for her creative work. Interestingly, her experiential research came after the documentary research; meeting indigenous people, camping out on the land, getting a tactile sense of place for both white and indigenous characters.⁴⁸

My own research is comparable. Once I'd decided to research this story, I did documentary research for the period in official and unofficial papers.⁴⁹ Also, I read historical novels, novels and memoirs written and set in this period, or that were relevant to the subjects of clashing cultures and mutual perceptions.⁵⁰ I read histories, philosophy and works on shamanism.⁵¹ Also, I read anthropology on Polynesia and Polynesian writings.⁵² During

48. Grenville, *Searching for the Secret River* 47.

49. These included Henry Byam Martin, *The Polynesian Journal of Captain Henry Byam Martin R.N.* (Canberra: Australian National UP, 1981); The Papers of Admiral Sir Henry Byam Martin (British Library 41464, vol CXIX – H.226); James Cook, *James Cook: The Journals* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003); William Ellis, *Polynesian Researches* (London: Henry Bohn, 1859); Paul Gauguin, *Noa Noa: The Tahitian Journal* (London: Dover, 1985); Alanna Knight, *RLS in the South Seas* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1986); John Lubbock, *The Origin of Civilisation and the Primitive Condition of Man* (London: Longmans, 1870); and Oliver Warner, *An Account of the Discovery of Tahiti* (London: The Folio Society, 1955).

50. These include novels and memoirs written in this period such as Collins, (1999); Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (London: Penguin, 1994); Herman Melville, *Billy Budd and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 2003); Herman Melville, *Omoo* (London: Penguin, 2007); Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1992) and Herman Melville, *Typee* (London: Wordsworth, 1994).

Also, I read novels and memoirs set or partly set in this period such as Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (London: Virago, 1997); A.S. Byatt, *Possession* (London: Vintage, 1990); Stevie Davies, *Impassioned Clay* (London: Womens Press, 2000); Gregory (1996); Valerie Martin, *Property* (London: Abacus, 2003); Penney (2006); Jem Poster, *Rifling Paradise* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2006); Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000); Tremain (2002), Vreeland (2004), Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith* (London: Virago, 2003); and Sarah Waters, *Tipping the Velvet* (London: Virago, 1999).

Furthermore, I read novels and memoirs involving themes on Polynesian culture, clashing cultures and issues of mutual perception such as Leila Aboulela, *Minaret* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006); Kate Clanchy, *Antigona and Me* (London: Picador, 2009); Alison Fell, *The Pillow Boy of the Lady Onogoro* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1994); Keri Hulme, *Te Kaihau* (London: Picador, 1988); Keri Hulme, *The Bone People* (London, Picador, 1986); Kingsolver (1999); Jennifer Martin, *The Huna Warrior* (Roseville: Prairie Angel, 2006); Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Picador, 1990); Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Pan, 1988); Celestine Vaite, *Breadfruit* (New York: Back Bay, 2006); and Celestine Vaite, *Frangipani* (Sydney: Arrow, 2004).

51. These include Michael Alexander, *Omai – Noble Savage* (London: Harvill, 1977); Steven Fischer, *A History of the Pacific Islands* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Lenora Foerstel and Angela Gilliam (eds), *Confronting the Margaret Mead Legacy – Scholarship, Empire*

this period of extended reading, I stayed in Tahiti and I began to do Polynesian shamanic work (I'll call it Huna here).⁵³ It seemed the best available route to understanding a non-literate culture that had handed down traditions, beliefs and practices orally for generations. At first, it was experiential research that slowly became more personally affecting; I took part in regular retreats and rituals. I've continued to do shamanic work for nine years under the guidance of a kahuna, and have found it has enriched my life. However, this study is not the place for a detailed examination of 'Huna'⁵⁴.

and the South Pacific (Chicago: Temple UP, 1992); George Grey, *Polynesian Mythology* (Honolulu, UP of the Pacific, 2002); Tom Harmer, *Going Native* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico, 2001); Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2006); Douglas Oliver, *Return to Tahiti* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1988); Robert MacDonald, *The Fifth Wind* (London: Bloomsbury, 1989); Liza Picard, *Victorian London* (London: Phoenix, 2006); Stefan Richter, *Tattoo* (New York: Abbeville, 1986); Anne Salmond, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog* (Auckland: Viking, 2003); Anne Salmond, *Two Worlds – First Meetings between Maori and Europeans* (Auckland: Viking, 1991); and Nicholas Thomas, *Islanders: The Pacific in the Age of Empire* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010).

52. These included Raymond Firth, *We, The Tikopia* (London: Routledge, 2004); Tehua Henry, *Ancient Tahiti* (Honolulu, Bishop Museum, 1928); Miriam Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the Postcard: Power, Place and Everyday Life* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2011); Sam Kamakau, *The Works of the People of Old: Na Hana a ka Po'e Kahiko* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum, 1976); Margaret Mead, *Male and Female* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1981); Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (London: Penguin, 1971); Rima Morrell, *The Sacred Power of Huna* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2005); Douglas Oliver, *Ancient Tahitian Society* (Canberra: Australian National UP, 1974); Margaret Orbell, *Traditional Maori Stories* (Auckland: Reed, 1993); Marshall Sahlins, *Social Stratification in Polynesia* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1958); Marshall Sahlins, *How 'Natives' Think* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995); David Simmons, *Ta Moko – The Art of Maori Tattoo* (London: Reed, 1986); Honi Tuwhare, *Deep River Talk: Collected Poems* (Auckland: Godwit, 1993); Jennifer Vanderbes, *Easter Island* (London: Little, Brown, 2003); and Nana Veary, *Change We Must* (Honolulu: Institute of Zen Studies, 1989).

53. 'Huna, some say, is the world's oldest spiritual tradition and has been in existence since time before time. Huna contains ways of travelling toward our own Higher Mind, ultimately linking to all other minds and the great light beyond. We journey by removing subconscious blocks, as well as by growing in consciousness and its use. Nothing is more important.' Morrell 1.

54. Some Polynesian authorities (particularly Charles Kenn, Pali Jae Lee and Lisa Kahaleole Hall) have claimed that the use of the term 'Huna' is an example of cultural appropriation, as it appears it was adopted by Max Long, who has also been criticised for his use of the terms 'unihipili' and 'aumakua'. I have been instructed by Joy Hicklin Bailey, who claims direct links with shamanic teachers - especially Taneo Sands Kumalae - and years of training in Hawaii. For the study of shamanism and Huna, begin with Harmer; Ihaleakala Hew Len & Joe Vitale, Eds., *Zero Limits* (Hoboken: John Wiley, 2007); Pali Jae Lee, *Ho'opono* (Honolulu: Mountain View, 2007); Morrell; and Veary.

Chapter Two – Historical Writing

Historical writing is an active part of the culture we create. In the context of fiction, stories activate people's imaginations and enable them to empathise. Historical fiction – depending on how well researched and accurate it is - may help readers to feel more connected with a historical setting, and to understand particular events or periods.⁵⁵ Our shared history contributes to forming notions of who we are; as a nation, a culture and as individuals.⁵⁶ Yet how can a fictional narrative tell any kind of truth about the past?⁵⁷ Historians make thorough and worthy studies of historical events and conditions, and publish some wonderful, readable history books, but are they right to reject 'allegorical' truths as myth because such truths 'corrupt' the 'consultable' historical record?⁵⁸ Histories may need to include polyphony like Nicholas Thomas' excellent history which presents Pacific islanders

55. Clendinnan, however, prefers historians to be in charge of such understandings, and advocates a watchdog role for historians, whose obligation she sees as 'to preserve the past in its least corrupted form'. Inga Clendinnan, 'The History Question: Who Owns The Past' *Quarterly Essay*, 23, 2006. 65. Oddly, this would mean trusting historians as a specialist moral authority (not a position they've particularly excelled at so far in documenting the colonial past, reproducing and upholding colonial power structures and assumptions), and her statement begs questions about what 'purity' and 'corruption' mean, as well as the notion of 'preservation', when academics, including historians, constantly re-interpret and re-frame.

56. Sheridan's essay unpacks the key role of historical novels in constructing popular understandings of the national story in Australia, whether reinforcing its legends or challenging them. 'Historical Novels Challenging the National Story', *History Australia* (2011) 13. Felicity Collins examines the contested contexts of 'historical truth' and the value of allegory in artworks like film and historical novel in her article 'Historical Fiction and the Allegorical Truth of Colonial Violence in The Proposition', *Cultural Studies Review*, Vol 14, No 1, March 2008.

57. Historical 'truth' is itself contested ground, involving grand narratives of 'progress' versus more postmodern, inclusive histories that may include memory, myth and 'traumatic histories'. Bain Attwood and Dipesh Chakrabarty question 'whether you can tell the truth about the Aboriginal past by using traditional methods of history', and Chakrabarty suggests 'one has to somehow risk the disorder (of a less verifiable, more inclusive history) that could also be democracy'. Bain Attwood and Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Conversation about Aboriginal Pasts, Democracy, and the Discipline of History', *Meanjin*, Vol 65, No 1, 2006. 206. Hayden White's work on holocaustal events reminds us that they function 'exactly as infantile traumas...cannot be simply forgotten or put out of mind, but neither can they be adequately remembered. Hayden White, 'The Modernist Event' in Vivian Sobchak, Ed., *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and Modern Event* (New York: Routledge 1996) 20.

58. For the subaltern, the indigenous, the silenced, there may be no consultable record, so what is left to consult for a more 'whole' history are memory, allegory, stories and myth.

as ‘not merely victims, but actors, who resisted colonizers’ impositions or creatively accommodated them’.⁵⁹ He unpacks the development of a more ‘two-sided’ view of Pacific history, and beyond that, a less ‘sided’ account which encompasses the active, inclusive and cosmopolitan attitudes of many Polynesians. Evidently, history is not simply a matter of fact; it is something that can be presented according to an agenda – often a political one.⁶⁰ The ‘facts’ can be presented within a narrative context, stressing a variety of selected ‘causes’, any number of which may serve specific political ends or agendas. As White declares, ‘history was a discourse... an objective process, or an empirically observable structure of relationships – a discourse capable of inserting its readers within the circle of moral conceptions that defined their practical social horizons; of leading them to identify this circle as their own conscience and guarantor of the integrities of their selfhood; and of impelling them to affirm this circle of moral conceptions as the reality that they could offend only at the risk of their “humanity”’.⁶¹ In Britain, our social composition is changing; how can we become more inclusive, while maintaining our selfhood and humanity?

British people are finding ways to conceptualise diverse histories and interactions in order to build a society that can embrace other cultures – without relying on simple notions of assimilation or integration. People of different cultures may benefit and enrich each other, rather than oppose, marginalise or antagonise. While I do not propose that fiction can solve socio-political problems, it should reflect the culture it serves, and attempt to at least represent key issues in contemporary society. Kate Clanchy and Leila Aboulela are examples of contemporary authors who have chosen to focus on characters of non-British origin. In Kate Clanchy's memoir *Antigona and Me*, an Albanian refugee is employed by a British housewife. The carefully examined relationship between the two women explores differing cultural codes, beliefs and personal aspirations. Another side of this kind of relationship is depicted in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*, which provides a similar story from the opposite perspective – that of a devout Moslem Sudanese servant for rich English families.⁶² Below, I shall look more closely at how historical fiction, especially in the context of Australia and

59. Thomas 3-4.

60. ‘The historians materials do not lie before him in the manner of a landscape or spectacle that he could depict in the way a painter would do... the historian’s principal task ... is to explicate the past through an unveiling and exaltation of the present that was latent within it, or, conversely, to enrich the present through explication and illumination of the past that inheres within it. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* (1987) 94.

61. White 103.

62. Clanchy (2009) and Aboulela (2006).

Polynesia, is also becoming more inclusive.

In his book *The Gift*, on the function of art in society, Lewis Hyde describes how in many smaller societies, trained individuals recite the family genealogy for many generations past.⁶³ When there are ceremonies involving large gatherings, the genealogist often recites both genealogies and stories about the group which then act as social cement, stressing the relationships and bonds between people and reminding the assembly of its shared values and aspirations. Like historical writers, the genealogists maintain and colour the links with the past with stories, both creating and confirming a sense of group identity through shared notions regarding past events and social endeavour. Similarly, it seems likely that historical writers may contribute to creating this sense of a shared past, and help to shape beliefs about that past, whether those beliefs are erroneous or not. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is set in the USA at the end of slavery, depicting effects of slavery on blacks and whites, and looking at the contemporary social landscape.⁶⁴ This novel creates a picture of the consequences of slavery for both ex-slaves and their descendants from the perspective of black protagonists, by a black writer. Morrison's scenario contrasts tellingly with William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner*; a treatment of a black rebel leader written by a white man, portraying Turner as something quite different to the folk hero of black culture.⁶⁵ Another example of different perspectives on history is Rose Tremain's *The Darkness of Wallis Simpson*, which explores Wallis' fictional point of view, playfully promoting the notion of Wallis as self-obsessed unto death, and supporting the historical 'fact' of a sovereign's abdication for an evil divorcee – however true or false that may be.⁶⁶ Hilary Mantel's depiction of Cromwell in *Wolf Hall* is likely to colour a widespread popular view of his personality and *modus operandi* via her very successful novel.⁶⁷ Historical writing actively contributes to forming and consolidating notions about who we are as a society, a nation.⁶⁸ Although the social and political relevance

63. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006).

64. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Pan, 1988).

65. William Styron, *Confessions of Nat Turner* (London: Picador, 1994).

66. Rose Tremain, *The Darkness of Wallis Simpson* (London: Vintage, 2006)

67. Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010).

68. 'All writers learn from the dead. As long as you continue to write, you continue to explore the work of writers who have preceded you; you also feel judged and held to account by them. But you don't only learn from writers – you can learn from ancestors in all their forms. Because the dead control the past, they control the stories, and also certain kinds of truth (...)– so if you are going to indulge in narration, you'll have to deal, sooner or later,

of historical fiction is not the subject of this study, it is nonetheless one of the factors in the background. The themes and subjects authors choose, the characters they focus on, the time frame and geopolitical setting all contribute to framing a set of potential messages to the audience. In my own fiction, I have chosen to explore social and cultural issues, writing, for example, about British paganism, and the effects of Christianity, especially on attitudes to women, in two Radio 4 plays.⁶⁹ I chose my material because it has resonance for me, and because I hope to explore possibilities beyond historiographic positions. My first Radio 4 docudrama *On The Rob* was a criticism of the dominant Western culture of consumerism.⁷⁰ Whether or not writers manage intellectually or materially to affect culture in any provable way is outside the remit of this study, but at least for my own part, I prefer to engage as an active part of the culture rather than a passive recipient.

The Secret River tackles a problem at the heart of modern Australia - the relationship between indigenous people and settlers. This question appears to be vital to the creation myth of Australia as nation, and is pivotal in Australian conceptions about who they are and what they stand for as a society.⁷¹ Currently the Australian creation myth runs something like this: the first white Australians were a feisty set of settlers, some criminals, some not, who were given a chance to make a new life for themselves following transportation. Their resourcefulness, courage and purpose carved out a new country. So far, so good - but what were they carving it out of? Modern Australians understand that the country was not an uninhabited landscape – there were other people there before them, people they now have to recognise as having equal humanity and political rights. It can no longer be ignored that these people were routed from their traditional land, and were abused, enslaved and murdered.⁷² There were massacres and continuing degradations and tortures were visited on

with those from previous layers of time.’ Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead* (London: Virago, 2003) 159.

69. *Hanging Around*, Afternoon Play, writ. Rachel Bentham, prod. Kate McAll, BBC Radio 4; 2000; and *Cast in Stone*, Afternoon Play, writ. Rachel Bentham, prod. Viv Beeby, BBC Radio 4, 2006.

70. *On the Rob*, Afternoon Play, writ. Rachel Bentham, prod. Liz Taylor, BBC Radio 4, 1999.

71. See Sue Kossew, ‘Voicing the Great Australian Silence: Kate Grenville’s Narrative of Settlement in *The Secret River*’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 2007. Vol 42: 2, which examines competing narratives of settlement. The occurrence of the ‘History Wars’, in which Grenville was criticised by historians for presenting her fictional account of early settler years as supposedly somehow ‘superior’ to historical accounts highlights the political and emotional importance of the debate, which is discussed further later.

72. Grenville describes public records clearly showing government authorities condoning

the indigenous people for decades by the white settlers.⁷³ How can modern Australia – and its writers – find a way to cope with this knowledge without belittling the experience of so many, and without furthering or encouraging adversarial factions?

Unsurprisingly, historical fiction set in the Southern hemisphere has tended to mirror the marginalisation of native people, presenting white settlers at centre stage while the indigenous characters tend to be supporting or peripheral characters. For example, in Patrick White's *Voss* indigenous people are met fleetingly as an incidental threat to the central white characters, and in Peter Carey's *Illywhacker* indigenous characters are extremely minor, a tiny percentage of the huge cast he uses.⁷⁴ Grenville's earlier novel *Joan Makes History* features an array of white women and one indigenous woman, who provides an insouciant and fearless fragment in her jigsaw of characters excluded from official history.⁷⁵ Contemporary non-antipodean writers have included indigenous characters with varying degrees of ethnocentrism. Rose Tremain presents a pragmatic point of view for her Maori character Pare as she accepts responsibility for a drought, while Tremain adds an aside from the dominant culture that casts doubt on this belief.⁷⁶ Fay Weldon recently used the theme of Maori ancestral spirits in *Kehua*, nonetheless referring to her only (very minor) Maori character in a slightly patronising tone as a 'lovely, warm, rounded, vibrant creature'.⁷⁷ Once again, the indigenous is associated with the animal. David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* features a half-way character, a white man who has been living with indigenous people, who creates discomfort and disturbance among the whites. Malouf's approach partially side-steps the potential problems in depicting an indigenous character by providing him with a white racial origin, although he behaves and is treated more like an indigenous person.⁷⁸ He uses

violence against indigenous people and evidence of large scale atrocities which she found especially shocking as they'd been perpetrated by her 'own people'. Grenville (2007) 117 and 124-5.

73. An obvious example is the 'Stolen generation' of indigenous children forcibly removed from their families by the Australian government and fostered with white families.

74. White (1981); and Carey (1999).

75. Grenville *Joan Makes History* 167-183. This indigenous perspective is awkward, though, and her dialogue is particularly odd, which may have also played a part in Grenville's decision to remove all indigenous dialogue from her drafts of *The Secret River*, although she posits other reasons for this, as I discuss later.

76. 'She had offended the gods of the natural world...They had already commanded her – or so she believed – to cease her journeys.' Tremain *The Colour* 157-9.

77. Fay Weldon, *Kehua!* (London: Corvus, 2011) 21.

78. David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* (London: Chatto, 1993).

hybridity to problematise whiteness, as after being ‘rescued’ from an aboriginal community by whites, the hero Gemmy has a ‘double consciousness’, and cannot re-integrate into white culture. Early examples like Wilkie Collins' *Iolani* depict eccentric, inscrutable or stereotyped native characters, as do Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, *Typee* and *Omoo*. More contemporary writers’ approaches to representation of indigenous people will be looked at in brief below.

Although Grenville has never made such a grandiose claim for herself, I believe she has attempted to create a compass of sorts to help navigate the complex demands of audience, literary merit and the political arena. As I shall detail in the critique below, *The Secret River* and her subsequent novels (all of which so far continue this theme) provide the potential to work through a process of horror, regret, guilt (for white readers), acceptance and healing.⁷⁹ To put it simplistically, in her fictional version of the scenario, settlers and indigenous people didn’t understand one another. There was not necessarily animosity between them originally, but numerous misunderstandings piled up into hostilities and confrontations. Readers can inform themselves of the kinds of events and atrocities that were perpetrated (perhaps by their own ancestors), while at the same time Grenville’s story facilitates greater understanding of contemporary difficulties – ignorance, desperation and brutality - on both sides.⁸⁰ The critique below will examine the negotiations in her technical approach that allow the modern reader to feel empathy and understanding for both sides.⁸¹

79. Natalie Quinlivan writes *The Secret River* ‘continues to tap into a collective feeling of white guilt and question the basis of Australian identity in a highly relevant way, *providing possible answers* to these concerns’ (my italics). ‘Quinlivan on Kossew’s Lighting Dark Places’ *JASAL*, 11:2. (2011) 4.

80. Maggie Nolan used her study of reading groups to demonstrate potential links between reading in book clubs and the process of reconciliation as part of an examination of the role of literature in an anti-racist agenda, showing readers’ complex identifications with Thornhill’s decisions and an increased willingness to discuss the problematic past in her ‘Reading for Reconciliation’ *Expanding Conversations: Social Innovation, Arts and AntiRacism* presentation to the Australian Human Rights Commission, 15th May, 2012. See also Robert Clark and Marguerite Nolan, ‘Book Clubs and Reconciliation: A Pilot Study on Book Clubs Reading the “Fictions of Reconciliation”’, *Australian Humanities Review*, 56, May 2014; and Paul Ashton & Paula Hamilton, *History at the Crossroads, Australians and the Past* (Sydney: Halstead. 2010) – an exploration of different forms of history-making, questioning the role of professional historian and who owns the past via hundreds of interviews with the public.

81. Julie McGonegal usefully compares the politics of postcolonial forgiveness and reconciliation in Canada and Australia, showing how the ‘Sorry Movement’ in Australia ‘confronted the beneficiaries of the colonial legacy with the traumatic legacy of their responsibility...by positioning those beneficiaries as witnesses’. Examining the relative lack of recognition of the problem among Canadian non-indigenous citizens, she argues that the

While by no means avoiding judgement, this novel leads the reader to a challenging question; what would I have done in the settler situation?⁸²

In *Heaven on Earth*, as an attempt to represent ‘both sides’, there are two co-existing perspectives from individuals who do not understand the world in the same way. Although an intimate relationship was possible in the short term (and clearly many did occur in this period), the cultural differences between the protagonists make an ongoing relationship impossible.⁸³ The progression of the plot depicts the breaking down of ethnocentric assumptions, and also the tenacity of culturally determined ethics in both cultures. Perhaps readers will contrast the fictional historical scenario with the present, in which such cross-cultural relationships are often viable and lasting. At the same time, it’s not possible to provide any easy answers, nor to avoid the moral problems of both past and present.

Ethical Issues

A range of ethical questions are relevant here. The first consideration was that representations of ‘the other’ are always problematic, and involve complicated, romantic and dismissive projections and paradigms that can arise from, or mask, fear. Not only are such representations inaccurate, they can be hurtful, diminishing and insulting. They can effectively support existing power structures of oppression and marginalisation.⁸⁴ Many of

process of reconciliation in Australia has ‘discontinued the “innocent ignorance” upon which colonial domination is dependant. 69. She uses *The Secret River* as an effective exemplar of insisting on ‘the necessity of re-presenting the secret of unspeakable horrors.’⁷⁰. ‘The Great Canadian (and Australian) Secret: The Limits of Non-Indigenous Knowledge and Representation’. *English Studies in Canada*, 35.1 (March 2009). 67-83.

82. This question is a key part of the process of reconciliation, and *The Secret River* was quickly recognised as posing it. ‘The Secret River...contributes to the current reassessment of the contact between the Aboriginal population and the colonists. It clearly and ultimately condemns both the literal violence of this contact and the symbolic violence of misrepresenting Aboriginal history.’ Amanda Crawford, ‘The Secret River by Kate Grenville’. *Labour History*, No 90, May 2006. 236.

83. Intimate relationships between indigenous people and non-indigenous sailors are both expected and specifically mentioned by both James Cook in his journals (2003) and in Ellis’ *Polynesian Researches* (1859). Captain Byam Martin’s *Polynesian Journal* (1981) also mentions punishments for desertion in cases in which close relationships between sailors and Tahitian women had developed.

84. As argued by postcolonialist critics like Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhaba; see section on Otherness below.

the problems that faced nineteenth-century Tahitians are evident from historical records, and I attempted to deduce aspects of their cultural approach and beliefs using a mixture of historical and anthropological sources, contact with modern Tahitians, and exploration and practice of 'Huna' approaches and techniques. Of course, the events, beliefs and reactions in my novel are a fiction, and there is no possibility of checking for verisimilitude so I'm aware that I constantly risk causing offence, but I take this risk in order to explore the narrative from the Tahitian perspective as well as the dominant colonial point of view. Modern Tahitians are raised in a predominantly Christian milieu, in a fusion of French and Polynesian culture. Many of their ancient cultural practices were banned (dancing, music, spiritual ceremonies) and later re-established through import from other Polynesian islands.⁸⁵ In the face of Christian missionary zeal, spiritual practices became more hidden, and also many kahunas, who were the repositories of knowledge, died through contact with western diseases. I am clear that what I am engaged with is fiction, but it is based on as much fact as I could find. I have fictionalised behaviour, responses, actions, decisions and personalities on both 'sides' of the colonial camp. There are so many gaps in available research material that this was unavoidable, and such fictionalising is necessary in writing fiction anyway. Historical fiction lies in a strange camp where some belief in 'fact' remains, although the new historicism challenges whether – even in the alleged non-fiction of history – any 'objective' analysis or reconstruction of history is possible. Berg suggests one can only approach culturally embedded texts with 'wonder', which is my position on encountering firsthand metaphysical texts that I used as sources, like Nana Veary's *Change We Must*.⁸⁶ It remains to be seen if my novel will cause offence, but I do not believe fiction writers should self-censor by shying away from representing a problematic milieu.

Many of my resource texts are anthropological, and the field of anthropology has been struggling with a similar problem regarding fiction and 'fact'. 'The gap between engaging others where they are and representing them where they aren't, always immense but not much noticed, has suddenly become extremely visible.'⁸⁷ The moral foundations of

85. See the introduction to Mary Kawena Pukui, *Nana I ke kumu: Look to the Source* (Honolulu: Hui Hanai, 1980) for a discussion of this.

86. Veary (1989). Daria Berg, 'What the Messenger of souls has to say'. Richard J. Lane, Ed., *Global Literary Theory; An Anthology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013) 389.

87. Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives; The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford, California : 1988) 130. (Anthropologists have been quicker and more willing than historians to acknowledge the issues of subjectivity in their discipline; see Inga Clendinnen, 'The History Question: Who Owns The Past?' *Quarterly Essay* (23) 2006.

ethnography have been shaken by decolonisation; the ideology supporting the former methodologies of anthropology has crumbled, and the writing of ethnographic accounts has become a contested area itself. Gifford points out how ethnography ‘is always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures’, that academic and literary genres interpenetrate, and that the writing of cultural descriptions should rightly be experimental and ethical.⁸⁸ As with novels, power and history work through the best ethnographic texts, which are ‘serious, true fictions – systems, or economies, of truth’.⁸⁹ ‘Anthropology no longer speaks with automatic authority for others defined as unable to speak for themselves... “Cultures” do not stand still for their portraits. Attempts to make them do so always involve simplification and exclusion, selection of a temporal focus, the construction of a particular self-other relationship, and the imposition or negotiation of a power relationship’.⁹⁰ The same can be said of writing a fiction located in another culture, loaded with difficulties as it is – but the difference is that fiction need not claim the status of ‘fact’ or ‘truth’. Depictions of ‘culture’ can be actively contested, there is no overarching, authoritative place from which to view the world.

Yet the question of offence remains. Checking the Australian response to Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* for any evidence of an outraged response from native people, nothing was evident in the press, but the Darug people were perhaps not likely to voice their opinions in that medium.⁹¹ So I sought permission to join the Darug people’s website and asked questions in their online forums about their views on *The Secret River* and Kate Grenville.⁹² The responses gave no impression that there was any offence. Rather, there was a lack of interest in Grenville’s work, as if such writing was of little relevance.⁹³ Darug forum posts indicated that depictions of ancestors by a white writer affect neither their self-image nor notions of themselves or their history, nor are such writings perceived as affecting them generally. Such a novel may seem inconsequential compared to more tangible and

88. James Gifford & George Marcus, Eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. (London: University of California, 1986) 2.

89. Gifford & Marcus (1986). 7.

90. Gifford & Marcus (1986). 10.

91. Known to have occupied the area depicted in *The Secret River*, along with other tribes annihilated by European occupation. See the Darug website, Darug People and History, and for a brief overview, Christopher Tobin’s *The Darug Story*, at www.darug.org.au.

92. <http://www.darug.org.au/> First accessed: 9.10.2009, and repeatedly since.

93. I am unable to quote these because I agreed to the confidentiality of site discussions.

pressing concerns.⁹⁴

Instead, the public and academic debate surrounding *The Secret River* in Australia appears to be largely centred on the issue of Grenville purportedly ‘writing history’ – a charge levelled at her by a few historians with an apparently limited understanding of the aims and *modus operandi* of the historical writer.⁹⁵ This seems to be a somewhat hysterical charge, based on a single simile used by Grenville in an interview, and Kate Grenville has answered it.⁹⁶ It is also odd, as in the ‘camps’ of both history and literary fiction, it is accepted that no full or true resurrection of historical pasts is possible.⁹⁷ My research produced no evidence that *The Secret River* caused hurt or offence, although it certainly provoked vigorous discussion. In Sydney, the book has been adapted as a stage play and performed (February 2013) by a cast including indigenous actors, perhaps indicating their

94. In more literary quarters, Larissa Behrendt, a Kamilaroi and Yualawuy novelist, clearly appreciates Grenville’s metaphor of the Thornhill mansion ‘built on resources taken from Aboriginal people’, i.e. on a carved stone indicating ancestral land. ‘Home: The Importance of Place to the Dispossessed’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108:1, Winter 2009. 76-77.

95. *The Secret River* was published around the height of the so-called ‘history wars’. As noted, the novel appeared during ‘a millennial confluence of ideologically driven debates and highly mediated cultural skirmishes about Australian history and the preservation of the past.’ Anica Boulanger-Mashberg usefully explains Grenville’s ‘up a ladder’ comment that seems to have been key in provoking conflict between Grenville and historians about the rights and responsibilities of historical fiction. ‘In her Own Margins: Kate Grenville’s Searching for the Secret River as marginalia to *The Secret River*’, *Limina*, Vol 15, 2009. 1. Amanda Johnson’s essay ‘Archival Salvage: History’s Reef and the Wreck of the Historical Novel’, *JASAL Special Issue: Archival Madness* ‘reconsiders postcolonial Australian novelistic activity within the archives, offering a riposte to the troubling reception of novelistic research activity by...white Australian historians’. See also Sue Kossew ‘Voicing the Great Australian Silence: Kate Grenville’s Narrative of Settlement in *The Secret River*’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 2007, and Grenville singled out because of her role as ‘public intellectual’ in Natalie Quinlivan’s review ‘Quinlivan on Kossew’s *Lighting Dark Places*’ *JASAL*, 11:2. 1. See also Elizabeth McMahon’s chapter in Kossew, *Lighting Dark Places: Essays on Kate Grenville*. (2011).

96. Grenville “The History-Fiction Demarcation Dispute” www.kategrenville.com/node/59 Accessed 19.10.2009. Also see ‘The Novelist as Barbarian’ Seminar: Challenging Australian History: Discovering New Narratives. Canberra: National Library, 14-15 April 2000; and Grenville’s interview with Koval ‘Books and Writing’ ABC Radio National, Melbourne. 8th January 2006. <http://www.abc.net.au/m/arts/bwriting/stories/sl522708>

97. For further discussion, see Paul Ashton & Paula Hamilton, *History at the Crossroads, Australians and the Past* (Sydney:Halstead, 2010); Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981); Inga Clendinnen, ‘The History Question: Who Owns the Past’. *Quarterly Essay* (23) 2006; Ann Curthoys, ‘Expulsion, exodus and exile in white Australian historical mythology’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol 23, No 61, 15, 1999; Tom Griffiths ‘History and the Creative Imagination’, *History Australia*, Vol 6, No 3, 2009; and Johnson, ‘Archival Salvage: History’s Reef and the Wreck of the Historical Novel’. See also Sarah Pinto’s chapter ‘History, Fiction and *The Secret River*’ in Kossew (2011).

level of approval.⁹⁸

In *Heaven on Earth*, of course my preference is to cause no offence, yet such an aim can be tricky in itself. Spivak notes some of the difficulties regarding ‘speaking in the name of’ the Other:

It is not a solution, the idea of the disenfranchised speaking for themselves, or the radical writer speaking for them; this question of representation, self-representation, representing others, is a problem. On the other hand, we cannot put it under the carpet with demands for authentic voices; we might be compounding the problem even as we are trying to solve it. And there has to be a persistent critique of what one is up to, so that it doesn't get all bogged down in this homogenisation; constructing the Other simply as an object of knowledge, leaving out the real others...⁹⁹

When I'm writing, I'm attempting to occupy an imaginative space, which implies at least an interest in the perspective of the Other, yet nonetheless does not claim to supply any ‘authentic’ perspective. Spivak sums up the ‘double bind’ when she says what deconstruction gives us is ‘an awareness that what we are obliged to do, and must do scrupulously, in the long run is not OK.’¹⁰⁰ Perhaps all I can do is try, and to critique my own attempts as Spivak suggests.

Authors may have a ‘retreat response’ when confronted with such ethical issues, preferring to avoid the area of conflict. Thebo notes that ‘retreating’ may be motivated by ‘a desire to find a method or practice immune to criticism’, which desire Alcoff condemns as ‘morally and politically objectionable’, because errors are unavoidable and such a desire

98. ‘The Secret River on stage was brilliantly staged—design, music, choreography—developed by Neil Armfield and Stephen Page over many years of representing Indigenous experience. The result was powerful, though it didn’t ultimately overcome the problem of the novel as history lesson...The anchor was the Indigenous woman who lives upriver with the white man, and who witnesses and survives the massacres. Ursula Yovich in that role was on stage more or less throughout, often in the shadows, as a presence and sometimes a narrator—a strong performance helped by her amazing singing voice. There was a large cast, including many Indigenous performers, but there has still been a feeling among Indigenous people that it remains whitefella history.’ Personal email to the author from an Australian academic who wishes to remain anonymous, 20.02.2012.

99. Gayatri Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic; Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (London: Routledge, 1990) 63.

100. Quoted in Mimi Thebo, ‘White Out: A Novel and His Master's Voice? Towards establishing good practice in cross-cultural representation’, Ph.D. dissertation, University of the West of England, (2010) 240.

reveals a need for personal mastery'.¹⁰¹ In writing *Heaven on Earth*, I have not 'retreated', and have risked being mistaken, while at the same time I have researched the limited sources available.¹⁰² Further, I have sought out research methods beyond the documentary in an attempt to compensate for the limited material available from indigenous sources. I attempt to situate myself - in this study - in contrast to Grenville, and not as a disclaimer.¹⁰³ In fact, I have been transformed by my shamanic research into Huna, which has become both a source of strength and a reservoir of solutions, and I have altered my conduct quite radically as a result of my research. In the end, I can only open myself to the field of possibility, while knowing that I cannot ignore or even temporarily set aside my cultural position.¹⁰⁴ It is cowardly to shrink from attempting to represent diverse characters, as well as technically limiting.¹⁰⁵ It also seems that, whatever critics may suggest as appropriate, writers are working in the field of imagination, and their fictions can and should explore and push perceived boundaries and conventions. Timidity does not help fiction. Writers have to dare, and also to be responsible for whatever they put out into the culture. What critics do is different; of course they are right to criticise, but not to prescribe or proscribe.

101. Thebo 241.

102. 'Engagement in writerly research cannot guarantee an ethical text any more than it can an excellent one.' Thebo 255.

103. 'Authors perhaps should take responsibility for their writing without using their own situation as a disclaimer.' Thebo 270.

104. 'His awareness of his conceptual thralldom is useless: it could be said of William Styron and any writer, including myself.' Gavin Cologne-Brookes, *The Novels of William Styron: From Harmony to History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1995) 119.

105. 'To continually retreat from using the first person whenever writing characters outside of one's biographical remit is terribly limiting.' Thebo 252. The same could be said of entering the perspective of characters outside one's biographical remit.

Chapter Three - Otherness and Identity

Writing from an indigenous perspective has been deemed problematic by postcolonial critics. There is a large academic literature on ‘Otherness’ and ‘Identity’, and I do not wish to dispute postcolonial criticism.¹⁰⁶ However, criticism does not provide a protocol for creative writers, who should be free to experiment, take risks and make mistakes rather than vigilantly exercise academic caution. Said and others have established how ethnocentric criticism of texts supports and furthers a process of othering – of races, cultures, nations and many other groups – using the malleable and illusory tool of language which in itself represents subjective systems of human relations.¹⁰⁷ In his work on Orientalism, Said argues that ‘every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric’.¹⁰⁸ It has been claimed that Eurocentric criticism, valorising the Eurocentric written canon, does not have the capacity to comprehend indigenous literature, which may be oratory, or fed by orature. Lee Maracle, a Salish writer, says that there needs to be a willingness to be transformed in order to understand indigenous stories: “We attempt to story another being/phenomenon’s behaviour and commit to its journey, its coming into being and going out of being, to this story. We then alter our conduct, our behaviour, to facilitate a common journey...”¹⁰⁹ However, it is not necessarily easy or simple for the reader or the writer to let go of complex, fearful, romantic and dismissive projections and paradigms, many of which may not even be conscious. Maracle hopes for a joint willingness contracted between storyteller and fellow journeyers; such readiness to let go of beliefs and behaviour is not common in Western culture where there is widespread investment in the personality and intellect, bound up in individualism and

106. For a start, see Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1993); Ian Chambers and Lidia Curti, *The Post Colonial Question* (London: Routledge, 1995); Peter Childs and Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Post Colonial Theory* (Harlow: Longman, 1996); Spivak (1990); Terry Eagleton, Fredrik Jameson, and Edward Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 1992); and Thiong’o Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986).

107. Nietzsche, Friedrich. ‘On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense.’ *The Portable Nietzsche*, quoted in Said ‘Orientalism Now’, Lane, *Global Literary Theory: An Anthology* (2013) 532.

108. Said. ‘Orientalism Now’, Lane (2013) 532.

109. Lee Maracle, quoted in Richard Lane, *The Routledge Concise History of Canadian Literature*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011) 204.

identity that often rests on the unexamined assumption that western beliefs and culture are superior to other cultures, especially non-literate, less ‘advanced’ or ‘developed’ cultures. Here is a significant problem for writers who wish to represent another culture. The writer’s choices have to be located in and inherent to the story and the personalities and behaviours depicted – and I’ll discuss these choices more below.

Although critical positions are not comparable to the work of the writer, the work of critics is useful food for thought. The postcolonial critical approach is in many respects a ‘writing back’ against the Eurocentric literary canon, rejecting European religions, symbols, allegories, standards and values in favour of indigenous cultures, practices, histories and belief systems, while attempting to use playfulness and creativity to create an oppositional postcolonial English language.¹¹⁰ Berg stresses that “any form of analysis is bound to be subjective”, and proposes that “it may be more suitable... to place more emphasis on the spirit of exploration in the historical enquiry into literary texts that seeks to recreate the perceptions from the past and their versions of historical experience”.¹¹¹ This train of thought looks quite promising for writers of historical fiction, or indeed any writers who may wish to represent the other in some way – it appears we are encouraged to be playful, to enter the journey of another imagined being, to use non- European codes and belief systems creatively, knowing there is no possibility of ‘truth’ anyway.

However, Spivak has rightly repeatedly argued that it is not possible to speak for the subaltern, as accounts of subaltern subjectivity are likely to be essentialist, and always defined in contrast to that of the ruling elites.¹¹² (And for the historical writer, the voice of the Other is likely to be subaltern.) How then may writers proceed? Spivak suggests in her more recent work that critics must remember that postcolonial identities are diverse, different, hybrid – heterogenous – and that the whole methodology of the postcolonial runs the risk of misrepresenting the Other. As she has in the past, again she proposes that the intellectual should, nonetheless, *try*. “For the ‘true’ subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself: the intellectual’s solution is not to abstain from representation.”¹¹³ More recently, Sardar points to traditional systems as both a strength and a solution.

‘What is most needed is the unabashed embrace of self-confidence,

110. Lane (2013) 487.

111. Daria Berg, ‘What the Messenger of Souls Has to Say’ in Lane (2013) 389.

112. Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999).

113. Gayatri Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in Lane (2013) 534.

the pride that dares to walk its talk. The figure that really terrifies the west most is the unapologetic Other with the competence and confidence to accommodate the contemporary world and amend it in ways undreamed of and unconsidered by the hosts of modernity and postmodernism. How could this be done? First, by seeing traditional systems as a source of strength and a reservoir of solutions for people's problems. Clearly this does not mean that all the urgent questions that beset non-western cultures can find ready answers in the past – that is the cloud cuckoo land of fundamentalists who substitute evangelical euphoria for thought. What the past offers is more complex. What makes the Other different from the west is a civilisational corpus of ways of knowing, being and doing defined by value parameters. These active principles have been in suspended animation often for centuries, under the onslaught of modernity and colonialism. They need the animation of thought, critically undertaken in the sincere belief that the value parameters matter and must be maintained. This is as much a leap of knowledge as it is a leap of faith. When the 'gaze' of tradition is turned upon the modern world as a knowledge enterprise, working through the value-defined categories and concepts of tradition, its geography looks radically different. This geo-morphing raises new questions, and renders old ideas fruitful repositories of new ways to think about what have so far been considered intractable problems.' ¹¹⁴

My approach largely resonates with his position. I embarked on this critical study because I noticed my own fear in daring to write the other. My main Tahitian character is represented as having the competence and confidence to accommodate and amend the contemporary world she encounters – more than that, she dares to question the colonial captain's assumptions and attitudes. His attitudes and assumptions are also repeatedly challenged through experiential evidence he cannot deny, an uncomfortable process for him. Through the research I have done, I see traditional systems as a source of strength and a reservoir of solutions for people's problems. (For example, ho'oponopono methodology has been used to good effect in social work with troubled youths. I have both experienced and witnessed the cathartic and beneficial effects of traditional techniques like ho'oponopono and lomi-lomi

114. Ziauddin Sardar, 'Surviving Postmodernism', in Lane (2013) 229.

massage, for myself and many others.) In my novel, Tahitian value parameters are not presented in a context of euphoric evangelism – they are balanced by the horrors and brutality of other aspects like infanticide and corpse-wearing. I cannot claim to know or understand ancient Tahitian value parameters and systems anyway – as a writer, I make leaps of knowledge and of faith. My Tahitian character Atea turns her ‘gaze’ on the peculiar geography and logic of the nineteenth-century world presented to her. The active principles of Polynesian philosophical systems apparently have not been in ‘suspended animation’ for centuries, so much as deliberately hidden from the western gaze, but now that they are becoming more public, I believe they provide new ways to think about what have so far been considered problems, intractable and otherwise.

Also, Sardar, along with others like Bhabha, argues that it is important to bear in mind that there is no cultural ‘rule’ in traditional societies – no one person possesses the absolute. ‘In traditional worldviews individuals are never abstractions.’¹¹⁵ Sardar points to tolerance as the connective tissue of traditional societies – ‘there may be multiple ways of operating and being innovative within or around the confines of ascription’ – so that there is no possibility of categorising an ‘other’ group behaviour, belief or value because there is always room for other behaviours, beliefs or values.¹¹⁶ This leaves room for the writer; Other characters in fiction need not behave in a stereotyped or prescribed ‘traditional’ way, they could reveal a variety of responses. Indeed, in my research, I found there was apparently so much inherent tolerance in traditional Tahitian social mechanisms that it was hard to find a credible reason for lasting conflict between spouses, so I invented a kind of cultural contamination to provide enough conflict to create murderous rage. Bhabha points out that the coloniser’s culture does not precede colonialism in a pure and homogenous form, it is *constituted* within the colonial context as a hybrid or split discourse that is unstable.¹¹⁷ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin state that the “post-colonial text is always a complex and hybridized formation. It is inadequate to read it either as a reconstruction of pure traditional

115. Sardar, ‘Surviving Postmodernism’, in Lane (2013) 234.

116. “Analyses of Other cultures which have concentrated on building up ideal-types of how things are or were seldom chronicled the spaces such societies offered for the individual. Western scholarship provides documentation of what ideal marriage rules are preferred... but only belatedly did it consider that at any one time there may be more unpreferred marriages than those that fulfil the ‘rule’ and that there may be multiple ways of operating and being innovative within or around the confines of ascription.” Sardar, ‘Surviving Postmodernism’, in Lane (2013) 234.

117. Bhabha (1994) 112.

values or as simply foreign and intrusive.”¹¹⁸ Hybridized texts draw on multiple traditions and modes of expression, and both hybridized and syncretist approaches imply processes that “avoid negating the energies and resistances of postcoloniality...simultaneously reaching back into indigenous traditions, and forwards to the reclaiming of these traditions in modern-day expressions of new postcolonial identities.”¹¹⁹ These approaches refute the monocentric, and are reflected in my dual voiced narrative, which depicts a process of mutual interaction, while providing no systemic answers or judgements, moral or otherwise. I attempted to approach the writing of this novel in the spirit Lane suggests for critics. “Working across cultural boundaries that were artificially imposed by colonial powers, rejecting and removing intellectual and political borders that have been fiercely guarded, allows the critic to return to authentic, pre-colonial ways of being, as well as forging new artistic and intellectual communities.”¹²⁰

Nonetheless, the position of writers is not the same as that of critics, and neither should it be. Homans looks at female writers ‘of colour’ (and the way white feminists critique such writers), and shows how both Alice Walker and Patricia Williams “write of their selves as unstable constructions provisionally made up of different and continuously shifting elements’. Walker extends this idea of the multiple self as also historicized and politicized, with origins in non-western culture rather than western theory. Unstable notions of self fit well with Polynesian Huna theory, in which the belief is apparently that there is no-one; personality/individuals do not exist. What then is the writer?

Writers operate in the field of the imagination. Most of us are clear that what we write is not ‘real’, yet we attempt, to a greater or lesser degree, to create a texture of ‘realness’, or reality.¹²¹ It could be argued that writing can be a process that contributes to creating reality, in the sense that writers can provide ideas that are acted upon in the future, as, for example, Jules Verne wrote about submarines before they were invented, and American comic book writers in the 1950s created stories about rockets going into space that were read by the generation that later made actual rockets that went into space. We also construct notions about the past that support our notions about our present society and cultural context, as mentioned earlier. In terms of historical writing, the past is always being constructed from the perspective of the present; it is always mediated, always affected by

118. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989) 110.

119. Lane (2013) 490.

120. Lane (2013) 492.

121. There are some exceptions, of course, like those who claim to ‘channel’ angels or other spiritual guides, or share what they categorise as past life experiences.

another cultural context, and often may reveal more about contemporary mores and foci than the historic. Although this is unavoidable, it's not tragic – as writers we select our subjects and orientations consciously and politically. We write fiction because we love the imagination, not because we want to recreate the past doggedly or faithfully.

The entire project of writing is a risk. As historical writers, we may want our writing to be credible in terms of character, cultural mores, historical period, geography etc., but we cannot safeguard our subjective creations of the past, nor our moral position – there may be much unconscious conditioning or prejudice inherent in our writing, either as part of Eurocentric culture, or as part of an indigenous culture or any other. I believe we have to and should attempt to go beyond our own experience, and imagine perspectives other than our own. It is probably impossible to achieve, but it would be perverse to insist that it is possible to write fiction and remain safely within the circle of our own experience. How then can we represent characters of another gender, or race, or period? In the attempt to remain 'safe', should we only represent what we know? And what is that? My own family includes people of other religions – Sikhs and Russian Orthodox, people of other nations – Irish, Zimbabwean, New Zealanders, Australians – yet I cannot claim to have any special understanding of those perspectives, as if they were homogenous anyway. The Turkish-French writer Elif Shafak speaks very eloquently about the dangers of remaining stifled within the circle of our own experience, quoting the Sufi saying 'knowledge that takes you not beyond yourself is far worse than ignorance.'¹²² The need to transcend cultural ghettos is as important for the Eurocentric as for any other.

As Ngugi points out, the arena of thought - one in which writers must take some responsibility - has been affected by colonialism as much as the more obvious geographical and political sphere.¹²³ I have sympathy for Aime's view.

'They [colonisers] talk to me about progress, about 'achievements', diseases cured, improved standards of living.

I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary *possibilities* wiped out.'¹²⁴

122. Elif Shafak, 'The Politics of Fiction'. Accessed 9.10.2012. (Quotation from Shams Tabriz).

124. 'Colonisation imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonised, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relation to the world.' Ngugi (1986) 16.

126. Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (1972), quoted in Peter Childs and Patrick

While I do not wish to exalt or valorise Polynesian culture, I hope that my respect for it underpins my writing, in counterpoint to centuries of overt and inherent denigration and marginalisation. As Spivak notes ‘The point is not to recover a lost consciousness, but to see... the itinerary [sic] of a silencing.’¹²⁵ I do not claim to speak for lost cultures nor on behalf of Polynesians. All I can do is situate myself, acknowledging that I am a) writing about a period and culture that are not my own, and b) in this critique, writing about another privileged white female writer, knowing that I cannot even temporarily set aside my own cultural position. Sarah Harasym points to the work to be done; ‘...we learn the slow and careful labour of unlearning our privileges as our loss.’¹²⁶ I hope that the mind can be ‘decolonised’, or at least become more aware of its colonised condition, and that writers are brave and foolish enough to attempt to avoid both stereotypes and homogenous representations.¹²⁷ Historical writing can no longer attempt to justify conquest by depicting a population of degenerate types. It’s notable that some of my source material for Polynesian culture was created by Hawaiians to reclaim and preserve aspects of practice and philosophy in the face of persistent marginalisation and denigration.¹²⁸ *Heaven on Earth* presents neither Europeans nor Polynesians as stereotypes of good/bad, civilised/degenerate, moral/immoral – I hope the characters are more complex than that.¹²⁹ However, this is not the place to explore the literature on Otherness, identity or post-colonialism. This thesis does not focus on the larger questions of what identity is for, why people constitute and cling to identities, or what the Other means for them. Rather, I concentrate on a narrower, and more writerly, concern.

Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (Harlow: Longman, 1996) 41.

127. Spivak 31. It’s worth noting that even the critical concentration on texts in postcolonial criticism leaves the oral cultures marginalised.

128. Sarah Harasym in the introduction to Spivak vii.

129. Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, accused of writing that is ‘not African enough’ points out that there is no ‘single story’ of experience, and stresses the need to explore heterogeneous perspectives from different cultures. ‘The Danger of a Single Story’ http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story Accessed 9.10.2011.

130. Bhabha argues that ‘the objective of colonial discourse is to continue the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.’ Bhabha 70.

131. For instance, Henry experiments with dynamic ‘Huna’ techniques as suggested by Atea, but retreats when he finds his own identity slipping. Atea compromises her cultural values by tolerating her husband’s behaviour – she is no more ‘typical’ than Henry.

What are the consequences, for a writer, of choosing to write from the perspective of an ‘othered’ character? In her novel, Grenville never enters the perspective of the ‘other’, and my concern is with what that strategy enables her to do, the details of how she does that, and what she sacrifices by that strategy. Fortunately, *Searching for the Secret River* and Grenville’s interviews and essays provide information about her decisions and motivation so there was no need to second guess her declared reasoning.¹³⁰ In Critique 2, I focus on the problems of a writer trying to write from an indigenous point of view, the details of trying to solve those problems, and the gains and losses of those strategies. The details are important here. Addressing only two novels has provided the space to look at the specifics. There are certainly arguments for taking a larger canvas. But what is largely missing from the literature is a detailed consideration of what it means for a writer, strategically and tactically, to adopt or avoid the ‘Other’ perspective.

132. Although I repeatedly tried to make contact with Kate Grenville, she was not willing to be interviewed. However, she has declared her motivations in articles, newspaper and radio interviews as well as in *Searching for the Secret River*. Further, in *Searching for the Secret River*, Grenville both disputes and reclaims *The Secret River*, inviting questions of the material, as Boulanger-Mashberg shows in ‘In her Own Margins: Kate Grenville’s *Searching for the Secret River* as marginalia to *The Secret River*’, *Limina*, Vol 15, 2009. 1-9.

Chapter Four - Representation in *The Secret River*

In her non-fiction book *Searching for the Secret River*, Grenville identifies the moment in which the trail of discovery that became *The Secret River* began. She was walking across Sydney Harbour Bridge along with 200,000 other people to support ‘the idea of reconciliation between black and white Australians’.¹³¹ At the end of the walk she noticed a group of indigenous people watching, and she exchanged a look with a woman in the group. ‘Our eyes met and we shared one of those moments of intensity – a pulse of connectedness.’¹³² When this look ‘sent a sudden blade of cold into my warm inner glow’ she realised that her own convict ancestor, Solomon Wiseman, would have had a very different attitude to indigenous people.¹³³ ‘In that instant of putting my own ancestor together with this woman’s ancestor, everything swivelled: the country, the place, my sense of myself in it’.¹³⁴ So she felt compelled to look for her own ‘sliver of history’ - Wiseman’s part in the process of settlement - and to confront the issue ‘the hard way, through the deep water of our history’.¹³⁵ Researching and writing the novel was an attempt to orient herself within the notion of ‘reconciliation’.¹³⁶ Grenville has acknowledged the influence of Bill Stanner’s lectures in which he asserted ‘there is a secret river of blood in Australian history’, and

133. Grenville, *Searching for the Secret River* (2007) 12.

134. Grenville, (2007) 12. This raises questions about assuming knowledge of the other person’s experience.

136. Grenville, (2007) 12.

137. Grenville, (2007) 13.

138. Grenville, (2007) 13.

139. A particularly fraught notion in the postcolonial debate. For a start, see Sara Ahmed, ‘Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism’, *Borderlands* e-journal 3.2. 2004. www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/ahmed_declarations; Larissa Behrendt, ‘Home: The Importance of Place to the Dispossessed’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108:1, Winter 2009; Adam Gall, ‘Taking/Taking Up: Recognition and the Frontier in Grenville’s *Secret River*’, *JASAL Special Issue: The Colonial Present*, 2008; Jodi Gallagher ‘Relaxed and Comfortable: Carey, Grenville and the Politics of the History Novel’ in Helen Groth and Paul Sheehan, Eds., *Remaking Literary History* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 233-244; bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996); Kelada ‘The Stolen River: Possession and Race Representation in Grenville’s Colonial Narrative’, *JASAL: Currents, Cross-Currents, Undercurrents*, 2010, 1-15; and Susan Wyndham’s interview with Kate Grenville, ‘A Woman with a Past’, *Sydney Morning Herald* 9-10th July, 2005.

McGonegal points out how Grenville transforms the ‘secret river of blood in her family’ to ‘the secret river of blood in Australian history’, ‘translating the practice of recalling the repressed contents of her ancestry into an act of recalling the repressed contents of Australian national mythology’.¹³⁷ As part of a process of reconciliation, the stages are thought to be similar to those for grief; first the repressed knowledge has to be presented in the public arena, whereupon various reactions will arise like shock, denial and debate, then mourning can occur, and finally acceptance.¹³⁸ The public and academic debates provoked by *The Secret River* have certainly further raised the profile of the history of violence, oppression and abuse of indigenous people, so the novel has undeniably been part of the process of bringing the repressed into the light.

Previous Australian novels have represented indigenous people in a variety of ways, but why has *The Secret River* caused such debate? The familial connection and Grenville’s openness about her own process may be key; connecting horrific events to one’s own family is likely to make such events far more personally affecting, and famously straight-talking Australians may appreciate her apparent transparency in showing how what started as a memoir became the novel.¹³⁹ Also, the straightforward, conventional narrative approach may have made the novel more appealing to the general public than her previous novel tackling the elisions of Australian history, the more postmodern, playful and polyphonous *Joan Makes History*. Nonetheless, Grenville has attempted, with a postmodern sensibility, to leave a respectful space in her representation of indigenous people. But this has a variety of effects. As I shall show, Grenville restricts herself to descriptions of indigenous people linking them to the non-human, flora and fauna. This conflating of indigenous bodies and presence with landscape risks ‘textually harking back to legislation under which Indigenous people were categorised as flora and fauna’.¹⁴⁰

Here there is a correspondence between Chinua Achebe’s criticism of Conrad’s depiction of Africans and criticism of Grenville’s depiction of indigenous people in *The Secret River*, and Achebe points to the writer who attempts to resolve important questions (of

140. McGonegal (2009) 73.

141. It remains to be seen whether there will be any restitution or compensation. Gail Jones’ contemporary novel indicates that remembrance may not lead automatically to apology, forgiveness or restitution. Gail Jones, *Sorry* (New York: Europa. 2007).

142. For indigenous people, ‘the river of blood’ is only a secret in the sense that Victoria Falls were undiscovered before Livingstone. See Gall, ‘Taking/Taking Up: Recognition and the Frontier in Grenville’s *The Secret River*’; and McGonegal (2009).

143. Kelada, ‘The Stolen River: Possession and Race Representation in Grenville’s Colonial Narrative’, 8.

European ambivalence toward the colonising mission and their own ‘system’ of civilisation) ‘by denying Africa and Africans their full and complex humanity’.¹⁴¹ But Grenville, unlike Conrad, provides an alternative to European ‘civilisation’ in the indigenous way of life that her hero acknowledges, thus providing the alternative frame of reference, as suggested by Achebe, that Conrad does not.¹⁴² Indigenous people in *The Secret River* are depicted as having a viable and even enviable ‘lifestyle’ and community, rather than a lack of civilisation.

Grenville’s decision never to enter the point of view of an indigenous Australian in *The Secret River* doesn’t seem to be a technical timidity. She uses many points of view in her writing in general, managing masculine and feminine perspectives, exploring the world as seen by European and English immigrants in different historical periods. She has written successfully from a range of perspectives, including children (short stories in *Bearded Ladies*), young people (*Bearded Ladies*, *Lilian’s Story* and *Joan Makes History*) as well as those who are ‘different’; outcasts, observers and people who are thought to be insane (particularly *Lilian’s Story*, written in the voice of a woman who became a famous Sydney ‘bag lady’). In *Dark Places* she writes from the point of view of a transgressive man, delving into his psychological state and the ‘reasoning’ behind his abusive behaviours.¹⁴³

In *Joan Makes History*, one of the many ‘Joans’ supplying an alternative perspective on the Australian past is an indigenous woman, whose voice is rendered in a mixture of pidgin and fluent period English.

I had *plenty tucker*, *plenty mutton*, as William was fond of reminding me in a threatening way when I wearied of his blandishments, and it was true he had bought me *plenty fine frock-frocks* from the catalogue. But of such trifles a life was not being

144. Chinua Achebe and Caryl Phillips, ‘Was Joseph Conrad Really a Racist?’ *Philosophia Africana*, Vol 10, No 1. March 2007. 61-2. See also Chinua Achebe, ‘An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness’ lecture at University of Massachusetts in Amherst, Feb 1975.

145. ‘If Conrad’s intention is to draw a *cordon sanitaire* between himself and the moral and psychological malaise of his narrator, his care seems...totally wasted because he neglects to hint, clearly and adequately, at an alternative frame of reference.’ Chinua Achebe ‘An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness’, *Massachusetts Review* 18. 1977.

146. Kate Grenville, *Bearded Ladies* (Queensland: University of Queensland, 1984); *Joan Makes History* (1989); *Lilian’s Story* (New York: Harvest, 1994); and *Dark Places* (London: Picador, 1994). See Veronica Thompson for Grenville’s transgressive images of women, and female identity within a patriarchal and imperial/colonial framework, ‘You are What You Eat: Women, Eating and Identity in Kate Grenville’s ‘Lilian’s Story’ and Barbara Hanrahan’s ‘The Scent of Eucalyptus’, *Ariel: A review of International English Literature*, 27:4, Oct 1996.

made. I had other ambitions for myself than being the dusky paramour of lascivious William.¹⁴⁴

This voice doesn't quite work, perhaps because of the oddly elaborate vocabulary and sentence construction - but of course the question that immediately arises is why shouldn't an indigenous voice have such features? Thought processes and observations should not have to be simplified in order to render a 'credible' indigenous character. Perhaps the difficulties were clear to Grenville when she wrote this novel, as her indigenous Joan occupies only eighteen pages out of a total two hundred and eighty five. In those pages she thieves, resists rape, witnesses the misery of indigenous children in a white 'welfare' institution, goes to sea with a playful Herman (presumably Melville) and carefully apes stupidity to avoid interference from white characters. 'Through all this I was the grinning darky'.¹⁴⁵ It's a sympathetic attempt; this Joan is a self determining character travelling through a white society that threatens to abuse and entrap her at almost every turn, but it's not quite convincing; the character feels like a construction within a white framework of experience, somehow lacking a convincing voice.¹⁴⁶ Such a character could not be developed without considerable research and reflection. This singular example points to the difficulties of entering the perspective of an 'other' who has been so abused, judged and misunderstood. A writer who has been socialised within 'white' European belief systems and values has a daunting task to face in attempting to enter such a perspective.

In previous novels, Grenville has made a conscious attempt to reclaim and explore the herstories and histories of the individuals who do not feature in documented history. In *Joan Makes History*, this is the central conceit of the novel as it jumps through Australian history, using the perspectives of various 'Joans', the unremarked but crucial women present throughout, yet frequently omitted from, official histories. These women are depicted as essential to the making of Australia - forming the possibilities, landscape, homes and culture. The novel could be seen as a manifesto for the importance of those who have been ignored.

147. Grenville (1989) 168.

148. Grenville (1989) 177.

149. Alex Miller, *Journey to the Stone Country*. (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin. 2003), winner of the Miles Franklin Literary Award in 2003, features a relationship between a non-indigenous woman and an indigenous man in his novel. His indigenous characters often act as mouthpieces for views about race relations, which 'perhaps demonstrates how the creative practitioner's awareness of debates around acceptable representations of the indigenous 'Other' and issues of authenticity can hijack the white writer.' Linda Miley, 'White Writing Black: Issues of Authorship and Authenticity in Non-indigenous Representations of Australian Aboriginal Fictional Characters.' M.A.Diss. Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, 2006. 15.

However, through Grenville's choice not to enter the 'other' point of view in *The Secret River* the reader is only able to guess at the indigenous perspective. Grenville reveals 'her' side of the history, the history that resides in her own family, the settlers' story. Her decision may pique the readers' curiosity, encouraging them to consider the indigenous perspective. It may also beg a response.

***The Secret River* - the text:**

In a short prologue entitled 'Strangers', it is a moot point just who the strangers are. They could be assumed to be either the indigenous people or the immigrant settlers. Each seems 'strange' to the other. It's telling that the first indigenous character to appear in the novel is suggested as a tangible expression of William Thornhill's own sorrow. Yet the indigenous man who appears out of the darkness is a stranger to Thornhill; different, unreadable and threatening. At this point, Thornhill is experiencing comprehensive hopelessness, dumped at the ends of the civilised world in a wasteland, with his wife and family to support and protect.¹⁴⁷ Outside his makeshift shelter, he begins to weep for the first time since he was a child. He is depicted as desperate, set up to provoke empathy.

It seemed at first to be the tears welling, the way the darkness moved in front of him. It took a moment to understand that the stirring was a human, as black as the air itself. His skin swallowed the light and made him not quite real, something only imagined.

(Grenville 5)

The unknown indigenous person is depicted as so much a part of the environment that he's almost indistinguishable from it, eerie in the way he blends with the night, initially not even recognised as human. He's perceived by Thornhill as liminal, not real in the way that Thornhill understands himself to be real, perhaps even a product of his own imagination (implying the ultimate power over another). Significantly, it is the man's blackness that makes him seem unreal to Thornhill.

His eyes were so deeply set into the skull that they were invisible, each in its cave of bone. The rock of his face shaped itself around the big mouth, the imposing nose, the folds of his cheeks. Without surprise, as though he were dreaming, Thornhill saw the scars

150. Grenville 4.

drawn on the man's chest, each a neat line raised and twisted,
living against the skin.

(Grenville 5)

Grenville uses metaphors of nature to underline Thornhill's perception of the man as part of nature; 'cave of bone' and the 'rock of his face'. The metaphors also indicate imperviousness; this is a mysterious, alien type of human. She reiterates the dreamlike quality of this moment along with the man's scarification, which marks him as other, outside of Thornhill's experience and understanding.

He took a step towards Thornhill so that the parched starlight
from the sky fell on his shoulders. He wore his nakedness like a
cloak. Upright in his hand, the spear was part of him, an extension
of his arm.

(Grenville 5)

While the step isn't obviously threatening in itself, Thornhill experiences it as threatening; mutual misunderstanding and its violent potential are indicated.

Clothed as he was, Thornhill felt skinless as a maggot. The spear
was tall and serious. To have evaded death at the end of a rope,
only to go like this, his skin punctured and blood spilled beneath
these chilly stars! And behind him, hardly hidden by that flap of
bark, were those soft parcels of flesh: his wife and children.

(Grenville 5)

The progress of Thornhill's reactions is presented with care. His responses are understandable and unsurprising – he is an unarmed, vulnerable man instinctively protective of his family. And contemporary readers may be uncomfortable with his response as a white man overreacting to the indigenous man who has every right to be there.

Anger, that old familiar friend, came to his side. *Damn your eyes
be off*, he shouted. *Go to the devil!* After so long as a felon,
hunched under the threat of the lash, he felt himself expanding
back into his full size. His voice was rough, full of power, his
anger a solid warmth inside him.

(Grenville 5)

Again, it's possible to sympathise with Thornhill, who is so used to being a victim. In the face of this perceived threat, he experiences himself as an empowered man again. In comparison with the indigenous man, he feels himself 'expanding back into his full size', after all his belittling experiences of abuse.¹⁴⁸ As readers, we are likely to sympathise with

151. Grenville 5.

Thornhill as underdog.

He took a threatening step forward. Could make out chips of sharp stone at the end of the spear. It would not go through a man neat as a needle. It would rip its way in. Pulling it out would rip all over again. The thought fanned his rage.

(Grenville 5)

In this complex and loaded scene, the worm (or maggot) is turning. Of the two, Thornhill is the first character to be explicitly threatening, but we are facilitated as readers in understanding his angry, defensive response. He would be less worthy of respect if he did nothing to protect himself, his wife and his sleeping children in the fragile shelter behind him. His unwillingness to die is dogged and admirable; he is presented as a man under threat, *in extremis*, thus creating empathy. In contrast, the spear carrying man's emotions or attitude are hard to discern. He is presented as a set of physical characteristics, likened to the harsh geology of an unknown country, less than human and less vulnerable. Grenville presents the indigenous figure within the context of nineteenth-century understanding.

This indigenous character is an archetypal fear embodied. He remains nameless and unindividualised throughout. 'The mouth of the black man began to move itself around sounds. ...*Be off*, the man was shouting. *Be off!* It was his own tone exactly.'¹⁴⁹ The man seems unfathomable, not human in the way Thornhill is. His mouth moves as if of its own accord. There is also some irony – even dark humour – in the choice of words he is assumed to be parroting. As readers, we know that he would be justified in saying these words. Thornhill, however, thinks nothing of the sort. 'This was a kind of madness, as if a dog were to bark in English.'¹⁵⁰

Be off, be off! He was close enough now that he could see the man's eyes catching the light under their heavy brows, and the straight angry line of his mouth.

(Grenville 6)

Here Thornhill begins to notes some more human features – light in his eyes, and the angry line of his mouth – and is at last able to attribute some human emotion to the man. At this point his own words dry up as if he's perplexed and stymied. If the man before him is a man

152. Grenville 6.

153. This dog imagery is also used by Conrad, e.g. to look at a negro boilerman 'was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches... walking on his hind legs.' Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. New York: Dover. 1990. 36. However, Grenville progresses the descriptions later, consciously setting up this more stereotyped imagery at the beginning.

as he himself is, then he becomes competition, a direct threat to Thornhill's right to his place, his family.¹⁵¹ So Thornhill's attitude becomes more defensive – even combative.

He had only the dirt under his bare feet, his small grip on this unknown place. He had nothing but that, and those helpless sleeping humans in the hut behind him. He was not about to surrender them to any naked black man.

(Grenville 6)

Again, Grenville reminds the reader of Thornhill's vulnerability, his desperation and his loyalty to his family – thus mobilising our sympathy for Thornhill as heroic settler once again. Sympathy for the indigenous man can be assumed – he has done nothing wrong, made no threat. Yet his presence is mesmerizing, dramatic, and interpreted by the hero as threatening. In the microcosm of this encounter, Grenville encapsulates much of the larger relationship between settlers and indigenous people.

In the silence between them the breeze rattled through the leaves. He glanced back at where his wife and infants lay, and when he looked again the man was gone. The darkness in front of him whispered and shifted, but there was only the forest. It could hide a hundred black men with spears, a thousand, a whole continent full of men with spears and that grim line to their mouths.

(Grenville 6)

Thus, we are left with the terror of the perceived threat of indigenous people. In this encounter, Grenville sets up the nameless, archetypal Aboriginal to be the repository of white settler fears. Grenville shows him to us only through the white perspective throughout the novel, and she uses this prologue to establish the psychodynamic at work. She also mobilises sympathy for both sides of the story while ostensibly only telling one side.

Having established the presence of the indigenous man as unreadable and mystifying, Grenville returns her focus to the white people. Perhaps the mystification is mutual, but the reader is left to guess. In the following section of about seventy pages, set in London, she sets up the cultural milieu of the Thornhills, demonstrating their ignorance of anything beyond their own white, English, urban world. Their lives are restricted to a small set of streets near the Thames, and for Thornhill, work on the river as boatman. They are depicted as impoverished. When being transported to Australia, their environment is even more claustrophobic. The imperative of survival is paramount and this section establishes further sympathy for the Thornhills. Although people of other cultures and races were

154. Echoing the wider political difficulty; if indigenous people were recognised as human, then they would be in direct competition for land, rights, legal recognition etc.

present in London at this time, Grenville indicates nothing in the family's experience to prepare them for meeting another culture.

Once they arrive in Sydney, the Thornhill family are warned by a drunken neighbour in the first dialogue about indigenous people. Significantly, it's the voice of the white man constructing the indigenous people as dangerous cannibals.¹⁵² The warning sets out the inherent attitude of fear and incomprehension among the white people. As the Thornhills settle in, they acquire a sort of tame 'native', whom they call Scabby Bill. This first relationship with an indigenous person is almost proprietorial. He sleeps outside their hut like a pet, and is treated like a beggar. He's a pathetic figure, 'who whined all day for a bit of bread'.¹⁵³ Again, the indigenous person is presented as animal-like, submissive and pitiable or threatening and unpredictable; two ends of a spectrum involving little relatable humanity.

In the morning Scabby Bill could be found sleeping up against the back wall as if he owned it, collapsed into angles, one long skinny leg sticking out, his entire naked black body on full view except for the once-pink bonnet on his head, sitting on black hair frizzed as if singed, a tattered ribbon hanging down over one ear, one hand closed around a silk fan gone to shreds, his eyes nearly closed, singing and chuckling and frowning by turns.

(Grenville 93)

He's risible and ridiculous, yet 'Scabby Bill' can instil fear. Outside, at night, he could cause 'a quick pulse of fright' to Thornhill when he goes out to relieve himself. Similarly to the indigenous man in the prologue, Scabby Bill is inherently threatening, described as 'a piece of the darkness moving as if the night itself was standing up to take hold of him.'¹⁵⁴

Grenville continues to associate the indigenous figure with part of the natural environment.

Yet he was still a fine figure. The sunlight fell on the crags and slopes of his face, the eyes cast into deep shadow beneath the ridge of brow. The creases beside his mouth could have been carved in stone.

(Grenville 93)

Although presented as odd, alien and pathetic, Scabby Bill is surprisingly impressive. Thornhill's view of him appears conflicted, confused by his different aspects, having no frame of reference for his behaviour or appearance. The pink bonnet alongside his disturbing

155. Grenville 5.

156. Grenville 93.

157. Grenville 93.

scarification jars and perplexes. Thornhill's wife Sal is embarrassed by Scabby Bill's nakedness. Thornhill 'smiled to see that cheeky wife of his reduced to confusion by a shameless black man. But like everything else that was peculiar here, Scabby Bill's nakedness soon became ordinary...he was the same as the ants or flies, a hazard of the place that had to be dealt with.'¹⁵⁵ This man seems to become more manageable for the settlers if he is relegated to the animal kingdom.¹⁵⁶ He is 'othered', and further, made into something not even human. The Thornhills find that Scabby Bill is good for business, drawing a crowd of customers 'to watch this black insect of a man capering before them, a person lower in the order of things even than they were.'¹⁵⁷

Scabby Bill is below the level of animals. Employing nineteenth-century hierarchies of importance ranking man as the pinnacle, and mammals, birds and insects of lesser worth (in that order), this framework fits the settler scheme of understanding, historically and emotionally. Not only is Scabby Bill a figure of fun, he's exploitable; the Thornhills have no compunction in using him to enhance their profits from selling alcohol. In the settlers' terms, there are two kinds of indigenous people, of which Scabby Bill is in one subdivision, a 'friendly'. He is usable, manageable and degraded.

The other was the kind Thornhill had met on the first night. Invisible to those who lived in the townships, these local indigenous people inhabited areas where settlement had not reached. They melted away, retreating from each new patch of cleared land. Again, they are introduced using nature imagery.

They wandered about, naked as worms, sheltering under an overhang of rock or a sheet of bark. Their dwellings were no more substantial than those of a butterfly resting on a leaf... The most Thornhill ever saw was a silhouette stalking along a ridge, or bending over with a fishing spear poised to strike through the water. He might see the splinter of a canoe, fragile as a dead leaf
(Grenville 95)

The white settlers understand the indigenous people as consistently other. Barely even identifiable by gender, they are as ephemeral as butterflies or smoke. They are elusive, transient, a watchful, disturbing presence, ghostly or faerie-like in their ability to vanish.

Yet they are a constant presence in the landscape around the vulnerable settlers. As

158. Grenville 94.

159. Echoing the *terra nullis* legal status mentioned earlier that facilitated white settlement, minimising indigenous visibility and importance.

160. Grenville 94-5.

Grenville researched her ancestor Wiseman, she became aware of the liminal presence of the indigenous people, for the most part left out of the official colonial records of white men. In *The Secret River*, she gives the indigenous people an insubstantial presence on the fringes of the focus – the white man's activity. She presents them as they were perceived at the time, as peripheral to the colonial settlement project, yet potentially a threat. 'But at night, a man ...saw the campfires everywhere, winking among the trees.'¹⁵⁸ The main concern of the settlers in *The Secret River* is survival. In the desperate, subsistence economy depicted by Grenville they wanted to get land in order to establish their new lives. Grenville presents the apparently random aggression of the indigenous people as difficult for the settlers to comprehend because there is no obvious sign of land ownership. The absence of the indigenous perspective creates a knowing gap for the contemporary reader here; there is another side to this story that is unnoticed and unexpressed. The settlers do not perceive the annexing of unfarmed land as theft because they do not understand it as 'owned'.

There were no signs that the blacks felt the place belonged to them. They had no fences that said *this is mine*. No house that said *this is our home*. There were no fields or flocks that said, *we have put the labour of our hands into this place*.

(Grenville 96)

The settlers are horrified that the indigenous people attack them, and there is no discussion of possible reasons behind such behaviour. Again, the liminal space appears where readers could wonder about the indigenous perspective. Sal reads the paper and learns that settlers are speared and killed. Although Thornhill tries to reassure her, the fear is a constant presence. As Thornhill begins to ply his trade he is vulnerable, but he has chosen where he works.

The Hawkesbury was almost as remote from Sydney as Sydney was from London. If a man got into difficulties on its unmapped reaches, he was on his own. Most of all, making money out of the Hawkesbury took a man with a taste for danger, because it was there that the blacks were most numerous and most warlike. They gathered by the hundred, it was said, and descended on the lonely huts of the farmers. Tales came back of men speared, their huts robbed, their fields burned.

(Grenville 98)

When Grenville researched records from this period in Sydney's Mitchell Library, she came across evidence that Governor John King promised the indigenous people that the land

161. Grenville 96.

surrounding the lower reaches of the Hawkesbury would not be settled.¹⁵⁹ Only a few months later, this promise was either ignored or forgotten, and from around June 1816, ‘settlers could with impunity shoot Aboriginal people more or less on sight’.¹⁶⁰ This was the land that her ancestor Wiseman settled, yet indigenous people harvested a crucial part of their diet there – yam daisies. It was one location among many in Australia where what amounted to a guerrilla war between white and black people was enacted, and Grenville reveals her shock at her discovery. ‘No one ever told me about the violence on the Hawkesbury, or that it was dealt with in this way.’ At this point in her research, she realises that her ancestor’s story had to be set within a larger framework. ‘Another story was taking over: the larger one of what happened when white met black on the edge of settlement across the country’.¹⁶¹ The personal became political.

As her research moved from the personal to the larger history, so her fictional world expands in the novel. Having established notions of ‘otherness’, and the limited cultural experience of her hero, she takes readers with him on his personal journey, letting us glimpse the beginnings of his precious dream of owning a particular piece of land. His longing for security and beauty is presented as understandable, relatable, part of the heroic settler myth. But danger lurks. When he and Blackwood sail into the perilous entrance to the river, Blackwood points out a pile of oyster shells left by the indigenous people. ‘Suck the guts out, chuck the shells away. Been doing it since the year dot’.¹⁶² On the continuum of white settler perspectives as presented by Grenville, Blackwood represents the most compassionate, understanding attitude towards the indigenous people, and is here indicating long established land use.¹⁶³

Where are they, then, he asked. Blackwood took his time answering. *Every-bloody-where, mate,* he said, gesturing up ahead... *They seen us, all right,* he said. *Now they’re telling the others, up the line.* Thornhill stared into the tangle of trees and rocks on the bank. He saw something move: a man gesturing, or

163. Grenville (2007) 116.

164. Grenville (2007) 118.

165. Grenville (2007) 120.

¹⁶². Grenville 104.

168. Blackwood also represents ‘an alternative frame of reference’ which allows Grenville to present options other than the choices Thornhill makes, other than the colonial perspective of inevitability, and thus to distance herself from the moral choices of her hero. See Achebe, ‘An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness’. 1977.

just a branch behaving like a man?

(Grenville 105)

Once again, the indigenous people are a peripheral presence, easily confused with the flora. But in Blackwood's view their knowledge and behaviour demand respect. In his capacity for understanding, Blackwood represents one end of the continuum for the white settlers, while Smasher is at the other end; abusive, unable to comprehend indigenous people, callously murderous towards them. Smasher boasts of his violence.

Smasher Sullivan reached for some things in the bottom of his boat and held them up. *Look what I done*, he called. Thornhill thought for a moment it was a fish he'd caught and was showing them, or was it a pair of gloves? Then he saw that they were hands cut off at the wrist.

(Grenville 106 -7)

Through the telescope, Thornhill sees the dismembered body of a black man hanging from a tree. At first he is unable to recognise it – he thinks it is a sack, then a scarecrow, then a beast hung up for butchering. Once again the indigenous person is hard to recognise as human. Eventually he works out what it is: 'The face was unrecognisable as a face, the only thing clear the yellow ear of corn stuck between the pink sponge that had been the lips'.¹⁶⁴ This is Grenville's first depiction of a murdered indigenous person. Readers are likely to align with Blackwood's shock and disgust, but we have been facilitated in understanding something of settler ignorance and desperation too. There is no indication in the text that Thornhill understands Blackwood's response. 'Ain't nothing in this world just for the taking...A man got to pay a fair price for taking...Matter of give a little, take a little'.¹⁶⁵ It is not clear that Thornhill understands the relationship that the indigenous people have with the land, nor that the settlers owe some return for what they take. It may not be acknowledged in Australian public life either, but in Grenville's novel it is clear that land appropriated by settlers had previously enjoyed a more balanced, respectful and symbiotic relationship with indigenous people than that imposed by the newcomers.

This feeling is inherent in Grenville's description of the way the settlers approach the landscape, contrasting with the way the indigenous people are a symbiotic part of it. Grenville demonstrates time and again that there is an exploitative, abusive element in the settlers' approach to natural resources. Smasher, for instance, burns oyster shells to make lime, and when he has used up the historic piles of shells deposited by the indigenous people,

172. Grenville 107.

173. Grenville 108.

he depletes the living population of oysters, burning them alive and destroying this food source. For the most part, settler attitudes to the indigenous people appear to be just as self-serving, ignorant and lacking in compassion as their relationship with the land. They are depicted as regarding the indigenous people as mystifying creatures of less value than themselves. The reader follows Thornhill's predicament, knowing he is not a 'bad' man, and is kept deliberately unsure of how he will negotiate his situation. Throughout, Grenville uses the linear structure of the plot to build a picture of Thornhill's ignorance, desperation and love for his wife, manipulating and facilitating empathy in the reader as she develops tension towards the crisis of Thornhill's involvement in massacre.

Thornhill's encounter with the secret river is a turning point. The shocking confrontation with the mutilated indigenous corpse occurs as Thornhill sails the Hawkesbury for the first time, and it is on this same journey that he falls in love with 'his' piece of land. The conflict between these two events provides a moral tension throughout the rest of the novel, and the longing for the land provokes a greater emotional reaction than seeing the mutilated corpse. This love relationship with the land is posed as vital, and underlines traditional settler narratives, yet at the same time providing an agency that contemporary Australians may well understand.¹⁶⁶

A chaos opened up inside him, a confusion of wanting. No one had ever spoken to him of how a man might fall in love with a piece of ground.

(Grenville 110)

We can guess that he may have to pay for it in ways he cannot imagine at this point; and the cost is to do with his potential relationship with the original custodians of that land – the indigenous people. The appearance of the corpse at this point foreshadows the coming difficulties. Blackwood's true relationship with 'the natives' is revealed later, but at this point he warns Thornhill about the necessary relationship with the local indigenous people.

Any amount a good land, he said...I seen you looking, he said... Give a little, take a little, that's the only way. He stared out across the water, then turned and spoke close in Thornhill's face, quite calm. *Otherwise you're dead as a flea.*

(Grenville 110)

Blackwood has a better understanding than Thornhill of the risks. The inherent question of how Thornhill will acquit himself in relation to the indigenous people is key to Grenville's theme. At almost exactly a third of the way through the novel, Grenville has set up the

174. See Staniforth (2013).

sympathetic hero to tackle this issue. He's an ordinary man, perhaps not the sharpest tool in the box, but willing to apply himself, a dutiful and loving husband and father who wants to make a viable life for his family. His motives are established as relatable and laudable, and having been shown his early deprivation, readers may sympathise. His relationship with indigenous people is carefully depicted. When the family moves to the isolated piece of land, his son speaks the looming fear.

There be any blacks where we're going, Da? Dick asked. *No, son, I ain't never seen a single one.* ...in Sal's silence he heard her knowledge that the blacks did not have to be seen to be present.
(Grenville 132)

Their fear remains unspoken, too potent to be voiced; the child voices the terror, reminding readers of vulnerability and the heroic urge to protect.

Will the savages try and eat us, Da? Bub looked around, fear on his little white face, and cried out, *Don't let them eat me, Ma...* (Thornhill) could not stop himself glancing towards the bow where the gun was wrapped in a bit of canvas (...) out of sight.
(Grenville 134)

The gun signals Thornhill's willingness to enact violence, setting up the future crisis. When the land where the indigenous people harvest yam daisies is disturbed, Thornhill chooses to ignore it, again foreshadowing trouble.

Everyone knew the blacks did not plant things. They wandered about, taking food as it came under their hand. They might grub things out of the dirt if they happened upon them, or pick something off a bush as they passed. But, like children, they did not plant today so they could eat tomorrow.
It was why they were called savages.

(Grenville 146)

Here the reader is shown that the settlers are not able to understand the indigenous peoples' way of life, nor their relationship with the land - and what they cannot comprehend, they classify as 'savage'. The Thornhills operate within their own cultural frame of reference, but later, Thornhill understands the indigenous approach as easier, and, perhaps infuriatingly, wiser.

The Thornhill household sweated away under the broiling sun, chopping and digging, and still had nothing to eat but salt pork and damper. By contrast, the blacks strolled into the forest and came back with dinner hanging from their belts.

He supposed that from a certain point of view it might seem

funny.

(Grenville 209)

Further on in the narrative, Thornhill demonstrates an awareness of an alternative and possibly better way of life. This consciousness in the text aligns with Achebe's point about writers reinforcing racism and colonialism if they do not allow their subaltern characters full humanity.¹⁶⁷ Here Grenville supplies a view for Thornhill that reads as respectful, and accords the indigenous people full, even elevated, humanity, like European gentry.

They were like gentry. They spent a little time each day on their business, but the rest was their own to enjoy.In the world of these naked savages, it seemed everyone was gentry.

(Grenville 238)

When Thornhill is involved in a confrontation with indigenous men, again, his reality is not depicted as superior or unquestionable. Instead he is shown to be something of a buffoon, ill-equipped to deal with the situation, and lacking the dignity of the indigenous men.

Thornhill wiped his hands down the sides of his britches. He could feel his palms rub over the seam where the fabric was lumpy. It was a comfort. ...In some sideways part of his brain there was an image of getting into the pocket himself, in the warm and dark, and curling up safe.

(Grenville 148)

Thornhill's childlike vulnerability and the thought of crawling into his own pocket make him seem pitiable. He attempts to communicate, 'speaking as to a couple of wary dogs', but when the older man talks over him, Thornhill begins to feel foolish and infuriated. In response, he uses patronising language 'the way the toffs did'. He laughs, saying 'You might as well bloody bark, mate', again reminding us of the dehumanising connection with animals.¹⁶⁸ This scenario is both sympathetic and conflicted, as in much of the rest of the novel; Grenville is creating tensions and complex individual difficulties that reflect both historical material and contemporary attitudes. As the tension intensifies, Thornhill feels the morning 'spiralling away into panic' and slaps the old man's shoulder.¹⁶⁹ This replicates a similar conflict discovered by

176. Achebe and Phillips (2007). 61-2. See also Chinua Achebe (1975).

177. Grenville 148.

179. Grenville 151.

Grenville in Governor Phillip's records.¹⁷⁰ Perhaps because it is imported from research findings, there is something about this slapping event that jars. It doesn't seem to 'fit' Thornhill, maybe because it's the gesture of someone routinely used to considering himself superior to others. Grenville is showing the logic of the situation, 'of newcomers moving into a place where other people were already living. One set of people wanted things another already had. How could there *not* be trouble?'¹⁷¹ When requested to 'go away', Thornhill does not think for one second of honouring the request. Given the personal history Grenville has created, the reader cannot be surprised. The rationale from his perspective is known; it's the perspective of the dominant culture, the victors, the settlers. It's the view we're used to receiving. Generally Europeans believe it is possible to own land, while that notion is incongruent for indigenous people to whom the earth is not a thing one can 'own'. During her research, Grenville came to understand that the relationship between indigenous people and the land was conceptually different. 'You didn't *own* it. You could use it, you were responsible for it. You were its custodian. But as an individual you didn't own land'.¹⁷²

Further, Grenville realised that for indigenous people, stories themselves 'operated somewhat in the manner of title deeds. If you'd been told the story – the full story, not the public version – about a particular piece of country, it was part of what gave you the right to be on it'.¹⁷³ Grenville readily admits her own confusion. 'No matter how much I read, I still couldn't really get my head around it all. It was so foreign'.¹⁷⁴ (The use of the word 'foreign' is interesting here, apparently without irony.) Throughout this encounter on the land Thornhill believes he owns, he is depicted as ignorant and stubborn – almost comic in his incapacity to deal with the situation.

As part of her research journey, Grenville describes going into the bush to the place where indigenous people had lived for generations. Sitting alone at her campfire in the night, she began to sense the dimensions of her story, 'bigger than my ancestor, bigger even than the tale of his relationship to the Aboriginal people'.¹⁷⁵ The 'room of light' made by the campfire 'was a comfort...But it blinded too. You had a choice. You could feel safe, but be

180. Grenville (2007) 111-2.

182. Grenville (2007) 125.

183. Grenville (2007) 129.

184. Grenville (2007) 129.

185. Grenville (2007) 129.

¹⁷⁵. Grenville (2007) 139.

blind. Or you could see, and know how small you were.’¹⁷⁶ Essentially, the whites in Australia wanted to feel safe, yet were blind about their new country and its original inhabitants, while the indigenous people could see, and also knew how small they were. Her white characters crave this kind of false safety; yet it’s credible only if the surrounding reality of the indigenous people is ignored.

Grenville develops the story using different characters to portray a range of attitudes among the whites.¹⁷⁷ There are varied responses to the indigenous people among the neighbour settlers, even among the Thornhills’ own children. In her research Grenville discovered ‘a complex, nuanced picture of those times. Among the stories of brutality were others of honourable, even courageous behaviour by settlers’.¹⁷⁸ The reader can follow the Thornhills’ struggle, hoping that they’ll behave honourably, yet fearing the worst.

Sagitty’s casually murderous attitude replicates that of some real settlers. Grenville comments that her research findings on crimes against indigenous people gave her a ‘poisoned, dirtied feeling’.¹⁷⁹ ‘Taking notes about these atrocities made me feel sick...The last time I’d felt like this – shocked, tainted – was when, as a student, I’d accidentally come across a book full of pictures of people in the Nazi death camps’.¹⁸⁰ Another character, Spider, voices sentiments similar to Sagitty’s. ‘They’s vermin, he said, the same way rats is vermin. He sounded the way a man might if he’d been hanged and come back from the dead, Thornhill thought. Which was, of course, true of them all.’¹⁸¹ Thornhill’s thought serves to remind us of the jeopardy for settlers, background experiences that provide some explanation for the hardness in these men.

Even with these culpable characters, Grenville often facilitates some degree of understanding or amelioration without excusing settler attitudes and consequent behaviour. Blackwood is described using significantly similar imagery to that which Grenville applies to the indigenous people, but using simile rather than metaphor. ‘His face in profile was as if

188. Grenville (2007) 138.

189. Again, this range of attitudes provides alternatives to the overarching colonial power structure, enabling Grenville to provide some flexibility and distance from notions of the inevitable (colonial) tide of history, or ‘manifest destiny’..

190. Grenville (2007) 125.

194. Grenville (2007) 124.

195. Grenville (2007) 124.

196. Grenville 170.

carved out of stone'.¹⁸² He is depicted as the most sympathetic to indigenous people. When he explains that the indigenous people will go hungry if the yams are replaced by the settlers' crops, he mentions the promise Grenville discovered in her research – that the 'Governor said there'd be no more white fellers downstream of the Second Branch'.¹⁸³

Grenville lays out the Thornhills' choices; having got 'his' land, what is Thornhill willing to do to keep it? She links the microcosm of her settler characters to the historical overarching structures of colonialism, and the failures of understanding and leadership at the level of colonial government, putting her character's decisions into an unedifying, but broader perspective.

In Part Four, the tension increases with news of fresh 'outrages' by 'the blacks' on visits to Sydney. Sal pleads for a compromise.

Keep them happy, but don't let them take advantage...And they'll
be gone by and by, with their roaming ways.

(Grenville 199)

Thus, Grenville shows the alternatives. Sal provides other options than confrontations and violence throughout, but is largely ignored, much like other female characters in Grenville's novels.¹⁸⁴ Thornhill and his wife discuss the issue both of them have been 'fretting' over. Sal advocates Mrs Herring's give-and-take approach, and advises her husband to ask Blackwood's advice. He goes to visit Blackwood, whose home is different to the other white settlers' homesteads. 'This was a place where clearing and forest lived together on the same ground.'¹⁸⁵ Symbolically, this indicates that Blackwood has achieved some kind of integration with the indigenous people – once again Grenville demonstrates the alternative solutions.

Contact between the Thornhills and the local indigenous people develops slowly. Thornhill's son Dick spends time with the indigenous people. Long Bob makes fire in an expert display that humiliates Thornhill, who has no such talents. Thornhill's shortcomings,

197. Grenville 173. This similarity of description underlines his similarity of philosophy with the indigenous people.

199. Grenville 174.

202. See Staniforth (2013) for discussion of how Sal's 'independence of mind' is compromised in a reinscription of narratives of white (male) colonial legitimacy. 9. Also Dale Spender points out that themes of empathy and co-operation (with indigenous people) are virtually unknown in Australian white male writing, whereas some women writers provide 'a different, challenging version of history'. 'Rescued from Oblivion, *The Women's Review of Books*, Vol 6, N010/11 (July 1989). 35-36.

208. Grenville 213.

his unwillingness to be bested, his angling for status are poignant. 'But a man who could write his own name, William Thornhill, along a piece of paper, could not be made to look a fool by a naked savage.'¹⁸⁶ In response, Thornhill introduces himself by name, whereupon Long Bob repeats his name perfectly. When the man speaks his own name, Thornhill is unable to grasp it.

There was the first clear sound, made with the mouth pushed forward. That was clear enough, but the rest was not. It was as if a word that had no meaning could not be heard.

(Grenville 221)

Grenville uses his reluctance to be embarrassed in front of his son to reveal his incompetence. There appears to be no route to ease and understanding. In the thick of this, Thornhill reflects on the colour of the skin around him.

With no one but blacks around him, other than his own son, Thornhill saw that their skins were not black, no more than his own was white. They were simply skins, with the same pores and hairs, the same shadings of colour as his own. If black skin was all there was to see, it was amazing how quickly it became the colour that skin was.

(Grenville 221)

This reflection indicates that he feels in some danger of being drawn into 'their' world, which is portrayed as having its own integrity. There is a sneaky fear that their world could challenge his demonstrated here, positioning the world of the 'other' as potentially just as viable as his own, dangerously for Thornhill as it challenges his cultural assumptions, and he sees his own son being drawn into it. This challenge to his own system of understanding is positioned tellingly close to the violent attack.

In Part Five, both groups prepare themselves for confrontation. After a week of dancing and singing, nothing is the same for the settlers – their relative numbers compared to the indigenous people have been clarified. The Thornhills feel even more threatened. Interestingly, at this point Grenville depicts an indigenous woman chained up, as if pointing out who the really vulnerable ones were in this brutal description.

He thought it must be a dog...a black woman, cringing against the wall, panting so he could see the teeth gleaming in her pained mouth, and the sores where the skin had chafed, red jewels against her black skin.

210. Grenville 221.

(Grenville 262)

Once again, there is a canine reference. Then the woman is described as a series of parts and colours. Grenville gives her no individuality, only pain and fear. Smasher offers him sex with the woman, and is angry when Thornhill refuses. No saint, Thornhill does imagine it, but then feels ashamed. He leaves, aware that 'he had done nothing to help her. Now the evil of it was part of him'.¹⁸⁷ He is depicted as miserably understanding his own complicity.

Grenville creates empathy for the woman by describing her through Thornhill's eyes – surely, we don't need access to her perspective to empathise with her torture. When the harvest is pending, soldiers arrive to see the 'blacks' off, but they return from their mission beaten by the hostile geography and their quarry's ability to melt into the landscape. Colonial structures of control failed; there was no one to help the settlers with the intractable problem of the indigenous people. Grenville allows Loveday to state the government line discovered in her research: 'they are then to be driven away by force of arms by the settlers themselves'.¹⁸⁸ Historically, this meant *carte blanche* for the settlers, and she provides the information in the novel as if it is an almost predictable response to the situation, linking her story with the texture of documented history that had so affected her.¹⁸⁹ There is no need to hype it up; the bald statement of government policy is shocking, and the hero must decide on his response, without any active help from the authorities. Grenville thus places moral responsibility firmly on Thornhill.

Grenville has at this stage drawn a nuanced picture of the indigenous people and their activities, pieced together through settlers' observations and interactions. The settlers reveal a spectrum of attitudes, from murderous rage and abuse (Smasher and Sagitty), through fear, bemusement, and reluctant respect (Thornhill), a desire for compromise (Sal and Mrs Herring) to a respectful relationship from Blackwood, who is willing to put himself at risk to defend them. The whites are not one homogenous group, and neither are they united or clear about their responses. Smasher is at one end of the continuum, imprisoning a woman and displaying a mutilated body. He's depicted as lacking the most basic understanding of indigenous people as human beings, unashamed of his depravity and callousness. Blackwood is at the other end of the continuum, retreating to maintain his peaceful relationship with an indigenous woman and, it seems, their child. This spectrum of

214. Grenville 264.

216. Grenville 278.

217. Grenville (2007) 124.

attitudes reminds readers that settlers were active agents capable of different responses. Sal suggests that they could leave and set up business elsewhere, but Thornhill is not prepared to give up his dream. Sal's suggestion, however, serves to point out that there was a choice all along; settlers did not have to remain, nor did they have to continue the conflict with the indigenous people around the Hawkesbury river. They could have made a living elsewhere.

Once the array of white characters is laid out and differentiated, Grenville raises the bar in terms of jeopardy. She depicts a series of incidents involving friction over land, crops and the use of natural resources. As well as these external pressures, she builds the tension between Thornhill and his wife using aspects of their relationship, until in the end, their ability to stay depends on their position in relation to the indigenous people. Sal wants to return to London – a dream she cherishes throughout the novel – while Thornhill wants to stay where he can be lord of his own patch. A crisis looms when Sal visits the nearby camp and realises that the indigenous people have been using the area for generations.

They was here...*Seeing the place had made it real to her in a way it had not been before. She turned to Thornhill. Like you and me was in London. Just the exact same way....They was here...Their grannies and their great grannies. All along.*

(Grenville 300)

Poignantly, she understands the indigenous people as being like herself, and realises that the land on which the Thornhills have tried to establish themselves 'belongs' to the indigenous people by dint of centuries of use.¹⁹⁰ When she challenges Thornhill to leave, for fear of the indigenous people, he raises his hand to strike her, a turning point, significantly hinging on the question of the indigenous people. When Thornhill is called away because of an emergency, Sal threatens to leave – 'With or without you, Will, take your pick'.¹⁹¹ This ultimatum is key in terms of Thornhill's involvement in the ensuing massacre; Grenville stacks up the reasons why Thornhill chooses to murder, bringing together a number of factors to provide pressure.

The settler men encourage each other into action.

We must grasp the nettle, painful though it may be, or else abandon the place to the treacherous savages and return to our former lives. There was a silence while they all thought of their former lives.

218. Both Sal and Thornhill recognise the humanity of the indigenous people, and their own encroachment. This recognition is very different to an approach that upholds colonial structures.

224. Grenville 304.

(Grenville 311)

For all of them, the options are clear. They can take action and maintain their grasp on their new lives; freedom, and possibly prosperity and security – or they can lose their land and return to poverty and insecurity. Given the desperate life depicted in the earlier ‘London’ and ‘Sydney’ sections of the novel, Grenville makes the nature of their choice clear. For Thornhill, the added clincher is Sal. ‘Get rid of the blacks and she’ll stay...Ain’t no other way to hold her’.¹⁹² So Thornhill makes his decision. ‘Making things so that she would stay was worth any price’.¹⁹³ Grenville presents his desire to preserve his relationship with his wife as the catalyst behind his part in the violence; thus portraying the murdering settler as a man desperate to please his woman, rather than as a thug or a monster. This decision creates a more palatable ‘past’ for readers to conceptualise.

There is tangible dread in Grenville’s writing at this point. Shortened sentences, threats, the characterisation of the ‘daintiness’ of the plan all contribute to the horror. As Thornhill passes ‘his’ point of land with a boatful of potential murderers, he reflects on how his life had ‘funnelled down to this point’, realising that compared to waiting for his own death sentence in London, he had made this choice himself.¹⁹⁴ While Grenville makes it clear he understands his own culpability, he believes what they are about to do is a solution. He thinks of Blackwood’s indigenous woman and their child, but instead consciously switches to thoughts of the speared Sagitty, to make it ‘easier’. Grenville presents the truth of what happened to the indigenous people through this fictional prism. The settlers were culpable; she offers no excuse, but contextualises the desperation of the time and place. ‘And yet their lives, like his, had somehow brought them to this: waiting...so they could go and do what only the worst of men would do.’¹⁹⁵

As Grenville describes the attack on the encampment, she presents the figures of the indigenous people as if in a series of snapshots. It would perhaps be unbearable and tasteless to linger on details. Thornhill seems almost hysterical as he approaches, feeling himself to be surrounded with spears, imagining once again the spear in his flesh, shooting wildly at what turns out to be a tree - not a hero, but confused and inept. The language is swift, unadorned and direct.

227. Grenville 312.

228. Grenville 312.

229. Grenville 314.

230. Grenville 313.

A man came out of the humpy so fast he tore it open like a leaf: ran out, took a step or two, then fell to the ground with the side of his head a mass of bright blood. Behind him a woman and a child flung aside a possum-skin rug, the woman grabbing the child round the middle. But she had taken no more than a step towards the forest before George Twist was on her with his sword and, as Thornhill watched, her back and shoulder opened up in a long red stripe. She dropped the child and whirled about to pick it up again but John Lavender was there first with his sword and with one mighty swipe took off its head.

(Grenville 317)

There is a disconnectedness in the description. Initially, only the settlers have names, while indigenous people are archetypal man, woman, child. No reaction from Thornhill is supplied; the action moves on to describe the first personified indigenous person – Black Dick – retaliating with his club, and being shot. No pause is given for reaction as the snapshots appear one after another. Thornhill seems to be in too much shock, or too caught up in the moment, to emote as he watches. He ‘pointed his gun at blacks as they ran but the muzzle was always too late.’¹⁹⁶ The sequence leading to Thornhill actually pulling the trigger is built very slowly over a whole page, clarifying his own immediate peril, the difficulty he has in pulling the trigger, as if in slow motion, in contrast to the series of snapshots preceding it.¹⁹⁷ Grenville lays out his position thoroughly; Thornhill can defend himself or die, and he recognises the first and only man he shoots. Although the trope of stuckness and frozenness may signify the white writer’s difficulty in coping with the tough psychology of this sequence drenched in guilt, Grenville faces this unambiguously. His moral position is clear. For the first time in this section dealing with the attack, his feelings are mentioned.

A fly was around Thornhill’s face and he brushed it away. He closed his eyes. Like the old man on his knees he felt he might become something other than a human, something that did not do things in this sticky clearing that could never be undone.

(Grenville 321)

Significantly, here Grenville links the non-human to a white person as Thornhill aspires to

231. Grenville 318.

232. Kelada notes the tendency of white writers to represent white characters in scenes of black massacre as frozen and inept, thus providing a guilt-assuaging narrative for the present. ‘The Stolen River: Possession and Race Representation in Grenville’s Colonial Narrative’, *JASAL* (2010) 1-15.

non-humanity in view of the dreadful acts he has committed. Grenville presents the actions of her notional ancestors in unequivocal terms, without any breast-beating. The scene unrolls in a kind of shock, with lucid observations, and this one tragic rider. At the close of this section, once again indigenous people, in death, become part of nature. 'The clearing had a broken look, the bodies lying like so much fallen timber.'¹⁹⁸

In the final section of the novel, Grenville shifts her characters ahead a couple of decades to show the price they have paid for this massacre. On the face of it, they have prospered, and settlement has been established with 'no more trouble from the blacks'.¹⁹⁹ Thornhill has built a house like a fortress, but his economy with the truth has compromised his marriage and Sal is sadly complicit.²⁰⁰ His deceit has made 'a space of silence between husband and wife'.²⁰¹ Furthermore, their son Dick has left them. Here are two major considerations in Thornhill's life; because of his actions towards indigenous people, he has lost a son and irrevocably altered his relationship with his wife. He is shown to be paying a price of sorts. Symbolically, Long Jack remains on their land, maimed and miserable. Even at this point, the Thornhills believe that their way of life is something to which he must aspire. Yet Jack doesn't want Thornhill's cast-offs and refuses his charity, stroking the ground instead. Thornhill reflects that there is something he lacks.

But there was an emptiness as he watched Jack's hand caressing the dirt. This was something he did not have: a place that was part of his flesh and spirit...It was as if the very dirt was a consolation.
(Grenville 344)

Although he 'owns' the land, Thornhill does not get comfort from it. He is shown sitting obsessively watching the landscape through a spyglass.

He strained, squinted through the glass until his eyeballs were dry...Each time, it was a new emptiness. For all it was what he had chosen, the bench he sat on here felt at times like a punishment...This bench, here, where he could overlook all his wealth and ease, should have been the reward.

233. Grenville 323.

234. Grenville 327.

235. See Tonkin and Fletcher for a discussion of how Grenville depicts women oppressed by colonialism, patriarchy, language and violence, and how she suggests they may escape complicity in that oppression. Julie Tonkin and Don Fletcher, 'Kate Grenville: Giving Voice to Women', *Political Theory Newsletter* 8 (1996) 61-9.

236. Grenville 339.

He could not understand why it did not feel like triumph.
(Grenville 348-9)

Grenville shows that Thornhill has little peace. Despite his fortified house, indigenous people are always liminally present. They become a shadowy threat, closely allied with the land. Almost as if they personify his guilt and fear, Thornhill searches for them compulsively. Longing and regret sit with him daily, regardless of his wealth. Thus, we are given to understand that he continues to pay a price for his actions against the indigenous people.

Grenville has built a portrait of a man with whom the reader can sympathise – even against his or her better judgement. He's an unremarkable man, yet from his struggle for survival to his painstaking battle to provide for his family, he remains a man trying to do the decent thing, who loves his wife and works hard. The limitations of his abilities are human weaknesses, compensated by his willingness to strive. His growing love of the landscape surrounding the Hawkesbury River ironically also denotes him as sensitive – which sits uneasily with the knowledge of the importance of that same land to its original occupants.

Colonial structures are brought into focus as Grenville maps the processes leading to Thornhill's decision to kill. The policies of governments shape his life and possibilities as surely as his own struggle to make good. Grenville depicts many of the impulses driving Australia's early white history, enacted within the sphere of one small family. Among the Thornhills there is no planned evil; just desperation for survival, ignorance of the other culture, fear, and love. Having been taken along with Thornhill on his journey, some readers might be hard put to guarantee that they would behave differently if in his shoes.²⁰²

Grenville at no point provides excuses or justifications for the actions of the white settlers; instead she provides opportunities to understand the complexities for one man. The pain inflicted by his actions applies to us all. Thornhill, within the limits of his character, stands for her, and for us. As a white Australian herself, and having guessed at her ancestor Solomon Wiseman's likely involvement in comparable actions, the perspective of *The Secret River* links Grenville's personal history with the atrocities of the past. She readily acknowledges this. 'I'd seen that there was an empty space in my own family story where the Aboriginal people belonged. The whole point of writing this story was to fill that space'.²⁰³ It is clear from Grenville's comments on this novel that she hoped it was oriented towards reconciliation. Massacres, lies and complicity are some of the secrets in the cupboard that need to be looked at properly, so that there can be a possibility of moving

238. See Maggie Nolan 'Reading for Reconciliation', *Expanding Conversations: Social Innovation, Arts and Anti-Racism*, Australian Human Rights Commission 15th May 2012.

239. Grenville 193.

on.²⁰⁴ Thornhill seems stuck, and the final paragraph of the novel ends with Thornhill's yearning.

He could not say why he had to go on sitting here. Only he knew that the one thing that brought him a measure of peace was to peer through the telescope. Even after the cliffs had reached the moment at sunset where they blazed gold, even after the dusk left them glowing secretively with an after-light that seemed to come from inside the rocks themselves...

(Grenville 349)

The indigenous people, although they appear to be gone, are contained within the landscape, as if their presence remains inside the very rocks. Grenville has constructed the indigenous presence as part of the landscape, irremovable as the rocks. This echoes the colonial identification of the indigenous with the landscape, but it also emphasises the enduring nature of their presence, and the discomfort the white man experiences as a result. Discomfort and fear weigh very lightly in the balance against massacre, but at least the dynamic is laid out for discussion. Overall, I believe Grenville has been courageous to write these books, and to keep writing on the same subject, exploring it further in spite of the criticism she has received. Her hero performs as a kind of white Joe Public, rehearsing the tropes of desperate settler longing for land, security, and prosperity, while personal and political forces precipitate his terrible choices, which in turn lead to guilt, compromised relationships and silence. All this is relatable and obviously resonates with the reading public. There is a lot more work to be done in exploring and witnessing the indigenous perspective, and perhaps it is never work that can be done adequately by white people.

Chapter Five – Grenville's Choices

240. In a radio interview, Grenville talked about cupboards in Australian history 'we' have just not wanted to look at. She hoped *The Secret River* 'looks into them in a judgement neutral way, but I hope a clear-eyed way, because my feeling is that until we are prepared to look at all those slightly hidden, slightly secret places in our history, we can't actually make much progress into the future.' Ramona Koval, 'Books and Writing' ABC Radio National, Melbourne. 8th Jan 2006. Interview. First accessed March 2006.

In *Searching for the Secret River*, Grenville describes her eventual journey to visit indigenous people, very late in her research process. In the chapter titled 'The Aboriginal characters' she proffers a telling claim.

But Thornhill had one big advantage over his creator. He'd seen aboriginal people, spoken to them, watched them going about their affairs. Heard them speak, seen their faces, their hands, their hair, their feet. I hadn't.²⁰⁵

I find this almost impossible to believe. And I don't intend to attack Grenville's integrity by pointing this out, but it's an interesting indication of a certain kind of cultural 'blindness'. Could someone living in Sydney, as Grenville did, really have had no contact or sight of any indigenous people? I'd been there myself, around the time when she was researching this book, and seen many indigenous people. They were on buses, pavements, in supermarkets and shopping centres. How could their presence be so unnoticed? Had they become invisible to her within the context of the dominant culture?²⁰⁶ Elsewhere, Grenville has stated 'I'd never knowingly met an Aboriginal person (I was about 25 before that happened)'.²⁰⁷

The very act of observation can be so culturally determined that we are only able to see what is meaningful within the confines of our own cultural framework. Very early on in *Searching for the Secret River*, she admits that she hadn't thought about the 'other' side of the story, with a reference to her ancestor, Wiseman. 'It had never occurred to me to wonder who might have been living on that land, and how he'd persuaded them to leave it.'²⁰⁸ Later, when she visits a place where engravings made by indigenous people cover the rock surface, she is struck that there is now no-one left who knows their meaning.

How presumptuous I'd been, thinking that this was my story alone, to pummel into shape as I saw fit, a story I understood enough to force into the form I wanted... That story was somehow

241. Grenville (2007) 193.

242. Larissa Behrendt usefully examines this contemporary 'psychological *terra nullius* where Aboriginal people seem to be invisible, not registering in the national consciousness.' Larissa Behrendt, 'Home: The Importance of Place to the Dispossessed.' *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108:1, Winter 2009 76.

243. Lecture by Kate Grenville, 'Unsettling the Settler; History, Culture, Race and the Australian Self', Australian Psychoanalytic Society Annual Conference, 22nd July, 2006. (Also published in online journal *Psychoanalysis Downunder* 2006, and available on Kate Grenville's website under the title 'Unsettling the Settler' www.kategrenville.com/node/76).

244. Grenville (2007) 13.

part of all this – these trees, these rocks full of language that was lost. I didn't own that story. It had to be allowed to speak for itself. My job was to get out of its way.²⁰⁹

A man shows her a tree with a four metre long scar in its trunk from which indigenous people had levered out a canoe long ago. 'The tree was astonishing, but even more astonishing was that on my earlier visits(...)I'd never noticed the scar. I might have looked, but I hadn't seen'.²¹⁰ When she goes to north-west Australia to be with indigenous people, she overhears a group of them talking amongst themselves, and reflects on her own cultural orientation.

Oh, I thought to myself, they're speaking a foreign language.
 I heard myself think that thought.
No, I realised. It's me. I'm the one speaking the foreign language.
 I was ashamed. My first reaction had been to think they were the foreigners. That was how backward I was, underneath those fine sentiments. In spite of all my good intentions and my high-minded thoughts, I didn't understand a thing.²¹¹

Acknowledging her ignorance, Grenville is open about the problem of representing the indigenous point of view, and I believe she decided to avoid the minefield. The danger was that she could be accused of insensitivity, disrespect and high handedness if she dared to ventriloquise any indigenous character. She could not speak for them, so she excised their point of view from her manuscript.

Back in Sydney, I made some decisions. I would get rid of all the Aboriginal dialogue. It might be historically accurate to have the Aboriginal characters speaking broken English, but it made them less sympathetic, more caricatured.

Their inside story – their responses, their thoughts, their feelings – all that was for someone else to tell, someone who had the right to enter that world and the knowledge to do it properly.²¹²

This is key. Her decision stems from apparent humility, but it nonetheless places the Darug indigenous people in a place of such extreme otherness that they are construed as inaccessible – at least, to Grenville. Even if she is aware that dialogue isn't her strong point,

245. Grenville (2007) 170-1.

246. Grenville (2007) 168.

247. Grenville (2007) 194.

248. Grenville (2007) 198-9.

perhaps she gives up a little too easily. Other Australian novelists have represented indigenous characters more fully, including writers who are not identifying themselves as indigenous. Nicholas Jose is one example. In his pointedly titled novel *The Custodians*, he depicts a range of contemporary Australian characters, including indigenous people. Like Alex Miller's indigenous characters, they have forceful conversations about land.

'You don't *belong* to the land, Elspeth. You're the holder of a crown lease according to white man's law. Your people took the land.'

'My people bought the land off someone else.'

'Well, those people took it, or the people before them. It doesn't matter how far back you go, at the beginning it was stolen. Occupied. Nobody asked permission. It was taken and *nothing* was given in return. It was taken from *my people*.'²¹³

Jose doesn't shy away from 'ventriloquising' indigenous characters - but his characters are contemporary, so they can be depicted as sophisticated, intelligent, persuasive – they needn't be depicted using broken English as would be period-appropriate (and problematic) for Grenville's Darug characters. His novel pivots around questions of identity, land ownership, inheritance, and relationships between friends of different national ancestries. Perhaps he indicates his own view in his main character's thoughts, which hint at possibilities for change and progress.

Alex was different. He saw the grid laid over things. (...) He was interested in those grids and systems, and how reality itself might be changed by the structures of human perception and organisation.²¹⁴

A novel is a structure of 'perception and organisation' itself, long embedded in a literate, non-indigenous tradition. Authors like Jose do not face the same problems in depicting contemporary characters as writers of historical fiction in representing compromised communication through second or third languages. Research material is also less accessible for historical settings, although it's interesting to note that Jose sets out a number of documentary sources for indigenous material, perhaps defensively, in his Author's Note.²¹⁵

Another Australian author who has used an indigenous point of view is Adrian

249. Nicholas Jose, *The Custodians* (London: Picador, 1998) 340.

250. Jose (1998) 133.

²¹⁵252. Jose (1998) 294-5.

Hyland, whose feisty main character Emily Tempest is of mixed ancestry and, in his novels, segues between indigenous and white communities with a high degree of self-awareness. In Hyland's *Diamond Dove*, there are lots of individualised, witty indigenous characters yet he does not pull any punches when depicting his characters as violent, drunk and/or mentally ill. He uses a relaxed indigenous-style dialect in dialogue and, like Jose, is at pains to stress that his characters and tribe are fictional.²¹⁶ Perhaps these authors consider themselves better informed or more 'entitled' to enter the territory that Grenville eschews. Hyland's publicity repeatedly states that he 'spent many years in the Northern Territory, living and working among indigenous people'.²¹⁷

In Grenville's declaration of her lack of 'the right' and lack of knowledge, she excuses herself from trying to depict the interiority of her indigenous characters - at least in *The Secret River* – but there is further research, and closer representation, in her subsequent novels. What is the 'right' to enter 'that world', and how could one earn it? Grenville discovered late in life that she has an indigenous ancestor, and dedicates *Sarah Thornhill* (third novel in the Secret River loose trilogy) to this woman 'Rugig' and her daughters. Evidently she doesn't consider her mixed ancestry gives her any 'rights'. This begs the question of what would 'the knowledge to do it properly' consist? Perhaps an earnest desire to understand would be appreciated by the Darug people. Apparently bowing out gracefully, Grenville relinquishes the possibility of trying to find out more about the Darug and other indigenous people. As I shall show below, she does further explore the white relationship with indigenous people in her subsequent novels, and perhaps possibilities are still brewing. At least for *The Secret River*, she draws a line here, whatever the motivations.

In her lecture titled *Unsettling the Settler*, she acknowledged the difficulties in conceptualising past and present for herself, and Australians in general.²¹⁸ After describing her youthful pretence of 'going native' barefoot in the bush, she points to the core psychological self deception in the Australian identity.

We've denied the idea of ourselves as the 'other' here. We've had a kind of anxiety to prove ourselves not 'foreign' to it, not 'alien'. We've identified with the place, even appropriated the identity of

253. 'Warlpuju' do not exist: the people, the drawings and the places described are inventions.' Adrian Hyland, *Diamond Dove* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2006) Author's note at front – no page number.

254. www.goodreads.com/author/show/801366.Adrian_Hyland 25.2.13

256. Kate Grenville, 'Unsettling the Settler; History, Culture, Race and the Australian Self', 2006.

its true 'natives' in order to fend off any sense of ourselves as interlopers.²¹⁹

She notes how her own identity was challenged by the research she undertook for *The Secret River*, describing it as 'a long process of going through detail in order to taste every part of the new idea of myself not as one who 'belonged' here but one who – figuratively – was an outsider and a destroyer.'²²⁰ The writing itself was a deeply 'confronting shift of identity, but it did also feel authentic in a way all that barefoot-in-the-bush stuff had never felt authentic'.²²¹ In the same article, she notes that the novel provokes questions about white Australian identity. 'The book seems, for audiences, to be just a medium to facilitate the opening up of thoughts about belonging.' The issue of identity that has been so crucial to Grenville has struck a chord with the Australian public. Further, she acknowledges 'the way non-indigenous Australia has been until recently; in that unresolved state between knowing and not knowing... Unlike Thornhill, these days we are finally talking and listening and working on it'.²²² So, she sees *The Secret River* as a part of the process of re-examination of a national and cultural identity for white people.

However, her technical solution in terms of *The Secret River* is to allow a space in the story to exist: the untold story from the Darug point of view.

I might not be able to enter the Darug consciousness, but I could make it clear that there *was* one. To create a hollow in the book, a space for difference that would be more eloquent than any words I might invent to explain it. To let the reader know that a story was there to be told, but not try to tell it.²²³

As readers, our curiosity is piqued by the glancing contacts with the indigenous characters; why did Scabby Bill hang around the Thornhill's hut, what were the Darug doing when they gathered in such numbers for days then went away again, what was Blackwood's relationship with the indigenous woman and the child that was possibly his – what would her perspective be - and so on? (In the stage version of *The Secret River*, this indigenous character was given a voice, as she became the narrator.) In the novel, the lack of the

257. Grenville, 'Unsettling the Settler', 2006.

258. Grenville, 'Unsettling the Settler', 2006.

259. Grenville, 'Unsettling the Settler', 2006.

260. Grenville, 'Unsettling the Settler', 2006.

261. Grenville (2007) 199.

indigenous perspective is poignant and frustrating.

At the same time as making her decision about how to manage the indigenous point of view, Grenville notes that the association between indigenous people and the landscape began to emerge for her as a writer – the imagery noted all the way through the novel. At the close of *Searching for the Secret River*, she describes walking from her home towards the water's edge, thinking about how that landscape might have looked without all the additions of buildings and roads – if it was returned to its original rocky overhangs, creek and valley. She considers how indigenous people would have used that landscape, and feels new sensibilities towards the place known since childhood.

Writing *The Secret River* was the opening of a new set of eyes in my head, a new set of ears. Now I could see what was underneath, what was always underneath and always will be: the shape of the land, the place itself, and the spirit of the people who were here.²²⁴

Grenville's book about her research journey ends here. I believe that with *The Secret River* she intended to push the sensibilities of her audience towards a greater awareness of the original inhabitants of Australia.

I suspect that Grenville is using *The Secret River* as a 'slant' way of engaging as an artist with society, culture and beliefs. During a talk at the University of Melbourne, Grenville told a telling anecdote about an artwork she had visited.

A while ago I was in Canberra walking around one of the parks by the lake. Came across some kind of art work – a great many white poles, different heights. A sign told me it was a memorial to SIEV - Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel – X. It recorded that 146 mothers, 142 children and 65 fathers had drowned when it sank, and that “our message in making this memorial is that kindness is stronger than fear.” Oh yes, I thought, very worthy, very true, how sad. I walked closer, where the poles weren't a line but doubled back on themselves to enclose a space - and in order to read a second sign I stepped into the space: “the SIEV X vessel was 20 metres long. The exact dimensions are outlined by these 42 poles.” I glanced to right, where the curving rows of poles met, and to the left, where they met at the other end. I was standing in the middle of the boat that had somehow contained 399 other people, all but 47 of whom had drowned.

How can I tell you what I felt in that second? Rather than give it words like terror, grief, sadness, outrage, let me tell you what happened to me physically: my throat closed so that I wasn't sure I could go on breathing. Something happened around my middle, a kind of butterflies in the stomach, something tremulous

262. Grenville (2007) 221.

and frantic. My eyes seemed to darken so the colours of the morning were bleached into black-and-white. I felt my face lengthen as all the muscles let go and my jaw sagged. The sun was still shining but I was cold. I wanted to lie down and roll into a ball and howl.

All this happened without my choosing. It was an effect that the reading of the numbers hadn't achieved, nor the worthy words about kindness. As I stood on that patch of Canberra grass I went through an experience beyond my control.

So what's going on, in that moment when art takes us into a place where normal thinking is suspended?

...Confronted with a rich piece of art – oblique, original and surprising – the brain has no ready-made circuitry to process it. So, as it did with the challenge of learning to read, the brain will put a whole lot of pre-existing circuits together in new ways. If I'm right, experiencing art can – literally - create new circuits. New circuits are new ways of thinking, new tools that the brain can then use for other purposes.²²⁵ (author's bold)

Only when she occupied the physical space did she feel the emotional impact of the deaths of these people. Occupying the space moved her in a way that the numbers and words did not. A reader's involvement in a story and their identification with and understanding engendered by characters can create a similar emotional effect. Indeed, such physical or emotional effects are often considered a mark of a good, moving reading experience. Grenville appears to be conscious of the possibilities of audience engagement; readers can be enabled to alter their habitual modes of thought or experience.²²⁶ Readers can feel empathy for depicted characters, and this may free them from their set perspective, perhaps allowing them to shift and alter their perspective.²²⁷ Although Grenville doesn't overtly say so, I

263. Talk by Kate Grenville, "Artists and Climate Change," Festival of Ideas, Melbourne University, June 2009. KateGrenville.com/node/58 (accessed 18.08.2011). See also Meaghan Morris, 'Beyond Assimilation: Aboriginality, Media History and Public Memory' *Rouge*, No 3, 2004, who claims artworks can 'help create the possibility of a "field" of intersubjectivity where a different form of public memory may take shape.'

264. There is some development in Reader-Response theory that suggests that literature can effect such changes. 'An examination of the similarities between the experience of reading and the transference process of psychoanalysis demonstrates that, by activating the mechanisms of projection and identification, reading literature can function to re-form the self.' Marshall Alcorn and Mark Bracher, 'Literature, Psychoanalysis, and the Re-Formation of the Self: A new Direction for Reader-Response Theory', *Publications of the Modern Language Association* (1985) 100: 3. 1.

265. Maggie Nolan provides useful examples of this effect re *The Secret River* in a reading group that had read non-fiction about anti-indigenous atrocities, but found Grenville's novel more vivid and affecting, as well as experiencing complex identifications with Thornhill's decisions that were useful to their understanding. 'Reading for Reconciliation', *Expanding Conversations: Social Innovation, Arts and Anti-Racism*. Presentation to Australian Human

believe this is what she hopes to do in some small way. It's not too much to suppose that she considers her own work to be art that could create 'new circuits'.

Throughout *The Secret River* Grenville presents the settlers (and, to some extent, the indigenous people) as individual human beings. They have a varied range of problems, abilities and aims. 'Nuanced' appears to be one of her favourite words, and she depicts complex and difficult situations, avoiding easy polarisations. She is careful to avoid simple adversarial positions, and I believe this to be a considered approach that she chose to establish in the opening pages of the novel. The reader is presented with a frightened individual in straightened circumstances, and can empathise with his position. The white settlers are not simply 'bad' people; they are contending with difficult circumstances, and they are ignorant through no particular fault of their own. Some of them commit acts of depravity and brutal crimes. Some of them are capable of maintaining a loving relationship with 'the other'. Some of them extend the hand of friendship yet become confused and disillusioned – mostly through fear and misunderstanding. There are no simple categories to impose in this complex and fraught historical situation, and no homogenous attitude.

I suspect that Grenville is trying to provide a potential way forward for modern Australia. In *Searching for the Secret River*, she describes how the reconciliation walk over Sydney Harbour Bridge was the starting point for her novel. Thus, the way she frames her argument in *Searching for the Secret River* indicates her motivation and inspiration, leading to researching the past in terms of reconciliation and opening up the debate as an author. Like the Truth and Reconciliation trials in South Africa, *The Secret River* lays out a testimony of behaviours, acknowledging what happened.²²⁸ Terrible, heinous crimes were committed, in this case by notional, fictional settler ancestors. Grenville does not shy away from the atrocities committed by whites, and she includes some acts of aggression by

Rights Commission, 15th May, 2012.

266. Kelada, Gall and Clendinnan criticise Grenville for echoing the colonial framework, reinforcing it through reproductions of stereotypes like the courageous settler, providing an authoritative-sounding narrative that does not illuminate the unreliability of colonial perspectives, avoiding colonialism as a deliberate policy of subjugation and rationalising the actions of black and white protagonists as impersonal, historic forces rather than evil culpability. Kelada, 'The Stolen River: Possession and Race Representation on Grenville's Colonial Narrative', 2010; Gall, 'Taking/Taking Up: Recognition and the Frontier in Grenville's *The Secret River*. *JASAL Special Issue*, 2008; Clendinnen, 'The History Question: Who Owns the Past'. *Quarterly Essay* (23) 2006. However flawed, the public acknowledgement of the horrors and depredations as depicted in novels like Grenvilles, is also cited as a necessary part of the process of reconciliation. See McGonegal 'The Great Canadian (and Australian) Secret: The Limits of Non-Indigenous Knowledge and Representation'. *English Studies Canada* (2009) 35.1.

indigenous people. Above all, she allows the reader the possibility of empathy with both black and white characters. For both, their plight is understandable and often desperate. The reader is not expected to support or agree with the actions, but can gain some understanding of the historical and emotional context.

It's interesting that *The Secret River* seems to have caused such an angry reaction from some Australian historians, as noted in the introduction.²²⁹ Grenville speculates that this may be because fiction sells better than history, but perhaps there is another element, one that she is not likely to claim; the historians may envy her fiction's ability to move people, and to embed itself in their consciousness as a kind of 'truth'.²³⁰ This is where I believe fiction becomes both powerful and dangerous, and has more potential effecting change than scholarly history books, because of wider readership and a more empathetic form of writing.²³¹ Grenville hopes to create a shift in consciousness in her readers – a shift that can help Australians conceptualise their nation's past more sympathetically. Understanding the past with greater compassion and understanding could enable modern Australians to find more positive and inclusive possibilities for their future.

Nonetheless, there are limits and missed opportunities in what Kate Grenville is doing in her loose trilogy, *The Secret River*, *The Lieutenant* and *Sarah Thornhill*. A historical novel can provide an opportunity to present something of the 'other side' of the story.²³² During the research process, it would be possible to engage with indigenous groups in more depth, to create a dialogue, to begin to explore the unknown, to simply spend time with

267. Grenville, 'The History-Fiction Demarcation Dispute' (2011).

268. See Eleanor Collins 'Poison in the Flour – Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*', which examines Grenville's aim to focus on creating emotive truths about the past, promoting a journey of catharsis, in Kossew, *Lighting Dark Places: Essays on Kate Grenville* (2011). Also, see McGonegal on the necessity for returning imaginatively to the traumatic scene of colonial encounter in the process of apology-reconciliation-potential healing. Julie McGonegal, 'The Great Canadian (and Australian) Secret: The limits of Non-Indigenous Knowledge and Representation' (2009) 67-8.

269. Reading about massacres and murders in, for instance, Nicholas Thomas' excellent *Islanders: The Pacific in the Age of Empire* is sadly not as affecting as fictional treatments; he acknowledges population attrition via disease, but the emotional impact of losing perhaps half an entire population is hard to absorb in this context. See Brigid Rooney, 'Kate Grenville as Public Intellectual' in Kossew (2011). 'It takes the voice of fiction to get the feet walking in a different direction.' 17.

271. Toni Morrison in *Beloved* (London: Pan, 1988) presented a historical, predominantly black perspective through her novel set in the US after the official end of slavery. In contrast, Valerie Martin's *Property* (London: Abacus, 2003) tells the story of slavery from the perspective of a different 'other', the relatively powerless, 'liberal' white wife of an adulterous slave owner in the 1800s.

people like the Darug in order to learn more of their perspective (more time than a short visit). Such attempts may or may not impact on the writing, but I feel that writers can benefit from exploring wider research than mediated documents. Perhaps Grenville does not see it as her role to pursue such research apart from an occasional walk or camping trip, but it could be argued, given the absence in Australian history that is also represented in her novels, that it might be a duty for future writers. She has certainly opened up the debate. Perhaps current fictional treatments of the Australian past will be further supported by both histories and fictions that at least attempt to explore and depict the indigenous perspective that is presently sometimes missing.²³³

Chapter Six - Further works

In the novels subsequent to *The Secret River*, Grenville moves closer to the indigenous perspective. The second novel in her trilogy, *The Lieutenant* focuses on a close relationship between an indigenous girl and an Englishman.²³⁴ The third novel, *Sarah Thornhill*, follows the generational consequences of William Thornhill's behaviour through his family line.²³⁵

The Lieutenant is the story of a young naval officer, Rooke, who goes to New South Wales as official astronomer, where he resides in a hut some distance from his military

273. Although, as mentioned earlier, there are a number of history books already redressing the balance, such as Stephen Fischer's *A History of the Pacific Islands* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), and cultural works like Morrell (2005) as well as cultural and historical works by indigenous authors, like Kamakau's *The Works of the People of Old* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1976), Pali Jae Lee's *Ho'opono* (Honolulu: Night Rainbow 1999) and Pukui (1980).

274. Kate Grenville, *The Lieutenant* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2009).

275. Kate Grenville, *Sarah Thornhill* (Melbourne: Text Publishing Co, 2011).

fellows. His isolation enables a relationship of 'mutual respect and affection'²³⁶ to develop between him and an indigenous girl, Tagaran. The book is based on the diaries of a lieutenant named Dawes who sailed with the first fleet that brought convicts to Australia in 1788, and the extensive linguistic records he made of the Cadigal language, from which Grenville says she 'quotes verbatim' in every conversation she includes in the text.²³⁷ Here she enters into representing the dialogue of an indigenous character, something she decided against in *The Secret River*. The record of conversations made by Dawes no doubt gave her more confidence – critics would be less likely to question such a source, although clearly mediated. This novel provides a closer and more intimate portrait of an indigenous character than appears in any of her previous books – Tagaran is delicately rendered, and the friendship is poignant with subtleties and difficulties in this cross-cultural exchange.²³⁸ Using contemporary documents in this way is a neat strategy.²³⁹ It enables Grenville to side step potential criticism about representing the 'other' as she is relying so closely on historical records and also, by focussing on the mutual and positive nature of the relationship between Tagaran and Rooke, she avoids polarisation. Although Grenville stays firmly in the Lieutenant's perspective, Tagaran is depicted as a warm, generous girl of sharp intelligence with the authority of a natural leader.²⁴⁰ In this novel, Grenville for the first time portrays her hero's attempt to understand 'the other' as a conscious process rather than a necessity, an accident or an impasse.

Learning a language was not a matter of joining any two points with a line. It was a leap into the other.

To understand the movements of the celestial bodies, it was necessary to leave behind everything you thought you knew. Until you could put yourself at some point beyond your own

276. Grenville (2009) 305.

277. Grenville (2009) 306.

278. The poignancy revolves around the possibilities and missed opportunity implied in this relationship, much as novelist Kim Scott is interested in 'not what was, but what might have been, and even what might yet be.' See Kim Scott 'A Noongar voice, an anomalous history', *Westerly* 53, 2008. 103.

279. See also Lynette Russell's chapter 'Learning From Each Other: Language, Authority and Authenticity in Kate Grenville's *The Lieutenant*', in Kossew (2011).

280. 'It was more than intelligence, though Tagaran's understanding was like quicksilver... It was a quality of fearless engagement with the world.' Grenville (2009) 175.

world, looking back at it, you would never see how everything worked together.²⁴¹

Importantly, Rooke has to question his own identity, leaving behind ‘everything you thought you knew’ in order to gain understanding. Whether this is possible or achieved is questionable, but the passage above shows that Grenville has some understanding of the need to become distanced from one’s own world or identity in order to enter into another’s cultural reality. Towards the end of this novel, the Lieutenant goes on a punitive expedition during which he discovers that the intention is to capture or kill six ‘natives’, so he leaves the expedition, thus facing court martial and death. He remembers how he had been when he first arrived in Australia.

At Sydney Cove he had watched those natives running along the shore, keeping pace with the boat, shouting their unambiguous message. They had been nothing more than naked strangers. Sitting in the bow of the cutter he had had a musket ready loaded in his hands, primed to use it if ordered.

That Daniel Rooke seemed to have been replaced, syllable by syllable, by some other man. He knew those naked people now. He did not understand them, but he could no longer think of them as strangers.²⁴²

Rooke manages a moral clarity that the hero of *The Secret River* does not. Rooke is prepared to jeopardise his life and certainly ruin his career in the British Navy. Grenville makes it clear that his moral stand was unusual, and ends the novel with Rooke lying sick with fever fifty years later in Antigua, still thinking of Tagaran, after a life spent working for the abolition of slavery. ‘When he and Tagaran were both dead, when their children’s children were dead, the notebooks would tell the story of a friendship like no other.’²⁴³

The Lieutenant acts as an aside from the Thornhill story, depicting someone who took a firm stand against the tide of contemporary behaviour, someone who determined a different life path following his new-found understanding of the other, from which there was no turning back.²⁴⁴ Grenville focuses in on this one extraordinary man, whose experience

281. Grenville (2009) 234.

282. Grenville (2009) 280.

283. Grenville (2009) 298. And it is possible there were other friendships between whites and indigenous people.

284. This is reminiscent of *Lilian's Story*, which features the self-determining heroine who refuses to conform to contemporary social mores. *Lilian's Story* also explores how women

encapsulates much that is key for multicultural societies - the process of self-questioning, patient communication and the mutual development of understanding. This novel flags up hope, and provides a hero who 'did the right thing' according to current values. There can be no dispute that other choices were possible for the white people, though they would be unusual, and did not fit the colonial politics of domination. It embodies another re-evaluation of first contact and underlines Grenville's position that the tragedy of Australian history for indigenous people largely relates to miscommunication.²⁴⁵ However, it focuses on individual goodness, and willingness to be open to the 'other'.

Grenville continues with the Thornhill family saga with her next novel *Sarah Thornhill*. When Sarah Thornhill, daughter of William, falls in love with a man who is 'tainted', 'a product of 'interbreeding'', she is not allowed to marry him. Grenville depicts the implicit burden of guilt remaining in families in which horrors have been enacted and concealed. After having failed to protect her half Maori niece, Sarah Thornhill has her own baby, and the morning after her birth, takes her out onto the veranda to 'show her the place she'd come into'.²⁴⁶ At this tender and vital moment of openness, she sets out the emotional connections not only with past generations, but with the Maori mother and child now linked to her own family.

The baby looked round in a wise sort of way. Like she'd been here before and was glad to see it again but not in the least surprised. I could see Pa in her features...

My mother would be there too. Having a daughter was the nearest I'd ever come to knowing her. I knew now the pain she'd been through to bring me into the world. The pain, and the joy too.

My mother's mother must be in there too. Her father. And Pa's mother and father. Never thought till this moment of Pa having his own pa and ma. Further back even, a pa and a ma beyond him again. All the people that had gone into her making were part of her, the dead ones and the live ones, all packed into this parcel of brand-new person.

Love made me skinless. (...)

Of its own accord, too, a thought floating up as the sun rose. About another mother and daughter. Somewhere in that place I couldn't picture, New Zealand, a woman would of sat the same way I was doing now, feeling her daughter's sweet weight

are oppressed by language, violence and power; see Tonkin and Fletcher, 'Kate Grenville: Giving Voice to Women' (1996) 61-9.

285. See Natalie Quinlivan. 'Quinlivan on Kossew's Lighting Dark Places' *JASAL*, 11:2. (2011) 4. However, it would be naïve to assume that indigenous and colonial aims would be congruent and peacefully achieved if language/communication had been clearer.

286. Grenville (2011) 232.

against her. Just the same way I was doing, she'd of called down every god she had, to keep her daughter from harm.

But that daughter was the child I'd known. That sad silent poor thing. Not kept from harm.²⁴⁷

Towards the end of this novel, Sarah leaves her baby to make an arduous journey, not unlike a pilgrimage, to meet the Maori mother of her dead niece in New Zealand.²⁴⁸ Here she is depicted as taking an unusual and positive action, rather than suffering from moral failure.²⁴⁹ It is a reparation of sorts, and the journey into another culture gives her a taste of what it may be to be the 'other'. 'Where I was going, the person called Sarah Daunt was not as clever even as the smallest child.'²⁵⁰

I smiled and thanked and let myself be led, sat on a chair brought out for me, and all around me that other language flowing past like a creek of thick water where there was nothing for me to latch onto.

The girl had floated like this. Our life at Thornhill's Point, so crisp and real to me, had been something she'd floated and floundered in, a place where every face was unknown and every object was without the softness of knowing what it was or what it was for, where it was from or where it was going.²⁵¹

In all three books of this loose trilogy, this is the moment at which Grenville ventures closest imaginatively to entering the 'other' point of view. It is a telling moment, precipitated by a child's death, and anchored with regret. Sarah Thornhill's moment of reparation is simply to

287. Grenville (2011) 232-3.

288. Sheridan points out how other white female novelists like Thea Astley in *A Kindness Cup* and Jessica Anderson in *The Commandant* depicted female characters horrified by abuse and violence towards indigenous people, but who nonetheless remained implicated in the violence and complicit in its cover up. (Grenville has moved her character also to take some action towards apology and reparation.) 'Historical Novels Challenging the National Story', *History Australia* (2011) 13.

289. Staniforth claims Sarah Thornhill is 'unwilling to undertake the moral journey required to tell her father's story', but she takes the direct action towards the Maoris, which was perhaps more useful than 'outing' her father. For Staniforth, 'for Sarah as for Sal, her independence of mind fails', and retreat into 'silence and feigned ignorance' is the result. I'm not sure that damaging confrontation with perpetrators is a 'better' choice than providing apology and some comfort for the victims. Tackling the structures of colonial patriarchy would be a daunting undertaking, and Sarah is depicted as doing what she can. Staniforth 'Depicting the Colonial Home' 13.2.

290. Grenville (2011) 292.

291. Grenville (2011) 296-7.

tell what happened, in English, knowing that the Maori women may not understand the words, but hoping they can understand the emotional message of regret, apology and acknowledgement. This novel is dedicated to Grenville's indigenous ancestor Rugig and her daughters. Unlike Rouke, this heroine does not remove herself from the structures of colonialism that perpetrate ongoing misery, thus replicating the choice of most Australians, who do not leave their homeland in disgust. Instead, she makes a functional decision to do what she can manage, a journey of reparation which is risky and unusual, but does not directly challenge the structures of patriarchal colonialism. Grenville ends the novel with another declaration about the importance of simply telling the story of what happened. One could read this as a heartfelt riposte to the historians who have criticised her exploration of her own family's, and Australia's, history.²⁵²

I can only tell what I know. Cruelties and crimes, miseries on every side. But of all the crimes done, the worst would be to let the story slip away. For what it's worth, mine had best take its place, in with all the others.²⁵³

With disarming simplicity, Grenville closes the trilogy with this claim to 'telling', to providing a voice for at least one 'side' of the story, yet without claiming to be a moral authority; she does not insist she is telling it 'right', or redressing any balance. Instead, she proposes that the worst crime would be not to tell at all, to let the story 'slip away', much as it has in former histories and fictions.²⁵⁴ Positioning *The Secret River* and the rest of her oeuvre in the canon of Australian literature, historical fiction can be seen as a potential antidote to myth-making, using allegory to manage the experience of trauma and 'holocaust events' such as those employed in relation to indigenous people.²⁵⁵ Rather than being constrained by the mores of traditional approaches to history, fictional texts using

292. Like Sarah Thornhill, Grenville has undertaken a solitary and risky journey as a writer, doing what she can to contribute to the process of reconciliation. She has been vilified for doing so, and no doubt the critics are also contributing what they can to the process, from the vantage of their area of expertise.

293. Grenville (2011) 304.

294. 'Critical novelists share with historians the impulse – for some it is a moral imperative – to own the past, whatever injustices were perpetrated there, and to question the accretions of legend and obfuscation around past events.' Sheridan, 'Historical Novels Challenging the National Story', *History Australia* (2011) 14.

295. See Felicity Collins, 'Historical Fiction and the Allegorical Truth of Colonial Violence in "The Proposition"', *Cultural Studies Review*, Vol 14, No 1, March 2008.

postmodern, selective, self-reflexive methods and ‘fragmentary and/or poetic knowledge’ may have something to offer alongside histories.²⁵⁶

Yet Grenville’s approach has limitations. However poignant, the gap left in *The Secret River* by the absence of the indigenous perspective doesn’t fully tell their story, but it does acknowledge how little Grenville feels she knows. Perhaps the above extract attempts to safeguard Grenville’s practice as an author, yet of course she is aware that fiction isn’t simply ‘telling what we know’ – there are many complexities of choice besides; in terms of framing and structuring, representations, relative space given to characters or scenarios, and even the basic assumption that we ‘know’ anything, especially in relation to the past.²⁵⁷

Writers of fiction make things up. Writers of historical fiction may like to think that they’ve researched their subject to provide some factual basis for their imagination to work from, and clearly Grenville has done her research, as evidenced in *Searching for the Secret River*; but not everything in a work of historical fiction can be, or should be, substantiated, nor should such a work be consumed as if it is some kind of evidence. One of the joys of historical writing is that it can seek out the untold histories, the overlooked, undocumented perspectives and marginalised characters and events.²⁵⁸ In the end, the author has to choose material with which he or she is comfortable, and that he or she feels confident to shape according to need. Like any diligent student of European education, Grenville has begun with evidence and researched documents. Then she broadened her research to include the landscape and to make contact with people, thinking and feeling her way into the resonances of her story. There can be no prescriptive way for a writer to approach research, but it seems to me that Grenville began within her own ‘comfort zone’ and has steadily pushed her own practice to explore more and more of what the ‘other’ side of the story may be, without being especially risk-taking, and nonetheless experiencing a degree of criticism even though she limited her reach.

296. See Robert A. Rosenstone, ‘The Future of the Past: Film and the Beginnings of Postmodern History’ in Vivian Sobchak, Ed., *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event*. (New York: Routledge, 1996).

297. As Grenville clearly demonstrates with Sue Woolfe in ‘Jessica Anderson: The Commandant’ in *Making stories: How Ten Australian Novels were Written*. (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993).

298. Historical novels have evidenced a historical diversification from concentration on ‘top-down’ accounts involving aristocracies and those in power, to focus more widely on those in less powerful positions, more ‘ordinary people. See for example Tracy Chevalier, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (London: HarperCollins, 1999); Barbara Kingsolver, *The Lacuna* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009); David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (London: Sceptre, 2004); Deborah Moggach, *Tulip Fever* (London: Vintage, 2000); Morrison, *Beloved* (1997); Rebecca Stott, *The Coral Thief* (London: Phoenix, 2009); and Waters, *Fingersmith* (2003).

In contrast, fairly early on in my own research, I identified areas in which I felt uncomfortable as a writer, and decided to try to find ways to address the lack of confidence I was experiencing. Deliberately, I pushed the boundaries of my own 'comfort zone', taking risks that perhaps would be harder for an author who, unlike me, is a public figure in a country that is in a process of self-examination with regard to the sensitive issues of race, reconciliation and 'truth'.

Chapter Seven - Representation in Heaven on Earth

Let the tongue of everyone be free to speak; but what of it? What will be the end? Our sayings will sink to the bottom like a stone, but your sayings will float light, like the wood of the whau tree, and always remain to be seen. Am I telling lies?

Spoken by Mohi Tawhai to the assembled Maoris and Europeans at the Hokianga discussions of the Treaty of Waitangi 1840.²⁵⁹

Letting a thing come, rather than creating it - no assertions, constructions, formulations, ideologies - in order to gain access to all that is genuine, richer, more alive: to what is beyond my understanding....²⁶⁰

(Gerhard Richter)

My different strategy:

Unlike Grenville, I have chosen to write from both indigenous and colonial points of view. There may be more risks than gains in this strategy. This chapter begins with a brief description of background and research, then I turn to an analysis of the strategies used in writing the novel. One of my main problems as a writer is to avoid the reader thinking of Atea as the 'other'. Some readers may be Tahitian, but it is fair to assume that the majority will not be.²⁶¹

As well as examining the handling of Atea, there is some analysis of the handling of

299. Anne Salmond, *Two Worlds – First Meetings between Maori and Europeans 1642-1772* (Auckland: Viking, 1991).

300. Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962-1993* (Cambridge: MIT, 1995).

301. And Tahitians may find my depiction of her 'othering' and inaccurate. As with any other fiction, I cannot create any failsafe or security with regard to potential reactions.

the English character, Henry. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, I'm conscious that for me, and for many readers, a nineteenth-century male naval captain will also be in some senses 'other' – of a different culture, from a different society, removed by almost two hundred years from our own experience. Secondly, Henry is used to help the reader enter into the point of view of a person who begins by seeing Tahitians as 'other', but comes to see them simply as a variety of fellow humans.

Beginnings:

Like Grenville, I can identify a trigger moment. I opened the pages of *The Guardian* to see a nineteenth-century portrait of a young Polynesian woman, painted by an English naval officer.²⁶² The word 'murderer' was tattooed, upside down, across her face. I was intrigued. The connected article reviewed an exhibition on tattooing, *Skin Deep*, and this portrait is the first known example of a tattoo used as punishment.²⁶³ I tore out the article and pinned it up.

In approaching this story, I had two strengths I could draw on. One was my experience in writing about the marginal and the undocumented. The other was my experience of many cultures and countries. Like Grenville, I often write about undocumented lives drawn from life or history. My first radio play *On The Rob* featured a 'respectable' nobody.²⁶⁴ Like the main character in *Lilian's Story*, she's a transgressive character based on a real person.²⁶⁵ The first story I wrote for Radio 4, *The Body* (1997) was about a Muslim woman in the Serb-Croat conflict who had been raped. My play *Cast in Stone* was about a pagan medieval girl; her perspective isn't researchable through documentary material; she would have been illiterate.²⁶⁶ While some contextual research was possible, these were works of the imagination. Writing in the 'gap' where there's not much evidence can be both nerve-wracking and liberating. Writing from the perspective of characters very different to

303. Maev Kennedy, 'Marked for Life: history of tattooing revealed' *The Guardian*, 20.3.2002. 14.

304. Nicholas Thomas, *Skin Deep* (London: Exhibition, National Maritime Museum, 2002).

305. *On The Rob*, Afternoon Play, writ. Rachel Bentham, prod. Liz Taylor. BBC Radio 4, 1999.

306. Grenville (1994).

307. *Cast in Stone*, Afternoon Play, writ. Rachel Bentham, prod. Viv Beeby. BBC Radio 4, 2006.

oneself, like ancient Britons building Stonehenge, can be exciting.²⁶⁷ My background has provided me with experience of being the other and the outsider, and of other cultures. Since early childhood I have lived with people regarded as ‘foreign’, as we often had children and young people from other cultures living within my family for extended periods; mostly from Kuwait, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. From the age of eight, I moved to a new house, new school and sometimes to another country every two years. Everywhere I went, I learned to observe, interact and make friends, frequently in the role of outsider.

When we moved to New Zealand, into a street inhabited by Russians, Japanese, Maoris and New Zealanders, I was fascinated by the Maori household. They had gorgeously relaxed parties that went on for days; theirs seemed like the most enticing world I had yet encountered. There were Maori girls in my class, and Maori friends of the family. Given my experiences, I do not believe that the cultures of indigenous people were or are ‘lesser and simpler’.²⁶⁸ Since adulthood, I have lived in India and Africa as well as Britain.

The Research Journey

The story of the tattooed woman pictured in the *Guardian* article came first – it was her story I wanted to write. Creating the stories of undocumented individuals requires imaginative leaps, but I prefer to feel informed in preparation. I read as much as I could about ancient Tahitian culture and history, including accounts written by earlier visitors to Tahiti, like Captain Cook, Joseph Banks and Ellis, plus records made by contemporary missionaries and later visiting artists and writers, like Gauguin and Robert Louis Stevenson, in order to gather a range of different European perspectives²⁶⁹. Nineteenth-century Tahitians had no indigenous script, so genealogies, myths and stories were passed on orally (or by ‘infusion - breathing in the breath of the dying savant’).²⁷⁰ Knowledge was passed from kahunas to their selected students.²⁷¹ ‘Certain chants and other types of oral lore were always passed down although their interpretations would not be taught if no student was ready to receive them

308. *Hanging from the Sky*, Afternoon Play, writ. R. Bentham, prod. Kate McAll, BBC Radio 4, 2000.

309. Foerstel and Gilliam, xv.

310. These included Cook (2003); Ellis (1859); Gauguin (1985); and Knight (1976).

311. Oliver (1974) 600.

312. Kamakau (1976).

‘even if that was several generations later.’²⁷² There was a special language used by Tahitian kahunas to communicate with the spirit world, learned through recitations to the spirits.²⁷³ This system was disrupted by epidemics of European disease, and much knowledge was lost, or ‘went underground’ because of the imposition of Christianity (in Tahiti as well as Hawaii) and punishments for ‘heathen’ practices.²⁷⁴

I studied the habits of ancient Tahitians and Polynesians; the food they ate, how they grew, gathered, prepared and stored it, making bark cloth, tattooing, navigation and fishing methods, social relationships, worship and belief, and much more.²⁷⁵ Also, I read near contemporary novels and stories set in Polynesia, like *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Billy Budd* and *Moby Dick* by Melville, *Iolani* by Wilkie Collins and contemporary commentaries and history.²⁷⁶ Looking for the authentic Tahitian voice missing from much of the literature, I read recent work by Polynesian writers.²⁷⁷ Having trawled as widely as I could to get background material, and still continuing these studies alongside, I began to write bits and pieces in Atea’s voice.

As I wrote, I realised that she didn’t feel like a real person. The style was too similar to my own when using more complex sentence structures, while straightforward sentences felt sometimes too simple and naive. It was frustrating. I didn’t want her to appear stereotyped, simple, easily impressed or confused, but a nineteenth-century Tahitian who understands the world in terms of personal desires and energies within a context of local spiritual practices and beliefs. I felt I was groping towards her complexity, but I wasn’t clear about her view of the world, of her own relationships, of her attitude to the foreign visitors to Tahiti. So I went to Tahiti - to talk with Tahitians, to absorb rhythms of speech, the tactile

313. Morrell (2005) 24.

314. Henry (1928).

315. ‘The missionaries... did their best to stamp out the “sinful darkness of the people” by forcing Hawaiians to cover their bodies and passing laws forbidding traditional practices. The “darkness” the missionaries found in these bright islands included surfing and other games, tattooing, the hula, and even sexual pleasure itself.’ Morrell (2005) 7.

316. Various sources included Tony Cohen, *The Tattoo*, (Canberra: Outback Print, 1994) Ben Finney, *Hokule’a: The Way to Tahiti* (New York: Dodd, 1979); Firth (2004); Henry (1928), Lee (1999); and Simmons (1986).

317. Most useful were Melville, *Billy Budd and Other Stories* (2003); *Omoo* (1847); *Moby Dick* (1994); and *Typee* (1994).

318. From New Zealand, I read Hulme (1986 & 1988); and Tuwhare (1993). For voices from modern Tahitian writers, I read Chantal Spitz *Island of Shattered Dreams* (Wellington: Huia, 2007) and Vaite (2004 & 2007).

geographies of sea, shore and forest.

Background research was necessary for the English character too. I wanted Henry to be a nineteenth-century man with complex responsibilities, a tortured and repressed amorous background, and an unquestioned sense of entitlement. Of the two perspectives, his world view would be the most seriously challenged. Accounts written by visitors to Tahiti like Ellis, Cook and Robertson gave a broad impression of contemporary attitudes, as did other histories and accounts (e.g. of the Polynesian, Omai, visiting England).²⁷⁸ The portrait of the tattooed Polynesian woman appears in Captain Byam Martin's journal, which along with his letters is stored in the British Library.²⁷⁹ As I read them, I braced myself to encounter someone reeking of entitlement; a white colonial man busy annexing other nations and people for Britain, with no urge to question his own role. However, his writing and cartoons both surprised and delighted me. The arrogance was there, yet in many respects I was wrong.

Although his initial reaction to the native people of Honolulu in Hawaii (his first Polynesian port of call) was shockingly blunt, it was also fascinating, because his apparent racism and adverse reaction to the appearance of Hawaiians contrasted with his ability to recognise qualities he liked.

The pure natives ...are as ugly a generation as I ever beheld – There is however a hybrid – a cross between white men and native women – which is not so intolerably hideous as the Aboriginal stock. The people seem civil and good humoured.²⁸⁰

He clearly regarded the native people as savages. 'The *most* that can be said of the people is that they are in the very earliest stages of dawning civilisation; and savage life seems more congenial to their tastes and habits.'²⁸¹

Despite his attitude, his lively turns of phrase were entertaining and intriguing. His style was almost theatrical; he seemed thoroughly to enjoy his interactions with people, and an increasingly sympathetic attitude to Tahitians emerged. His initial generalisations disappeared as his journal progressed, replaced with nuanced responses to personalities rather than stereotypes. After six months, his sensitivity to their situation seemed heartfelt, even given his antipathy to rival French colonialists.

He [The French Governor] says it is a comedy – so it is for him

319. I used the sources mentioned, and Alexander (1977); Lubbock (1870); and Picard (2006).

320. Byam Martin (1981) 126.

321. Byam Martin 15.

322. Byam Martin 17.

perhaps! But for these poor islanders who have lost their country and their freedom – seen their home invaded, their houses burnt and pillaged – their kindred butchered & all that was most dear & most sacred – polluted by his hated race – there is not much of a comedy.²⁸²

Having read his journal, and his handwritten letters to his mother and sisters, I felt familiar with his joyful, flexible language. Byam Martin expressed himself with highly decorative language, so I allowed myself a restricted version of his floweriness.²⁸³ I wrote experimental first person drafts in the attempt to put myself in his shoes.

I shall never be able to tell anyone how filled with grandeur this place is – surely no one at home could imagine this silver expanse, or the extraordinary closeness of the heavens, as if the roof of the world has been lowered, and the wicks of all the stars trimmed so they burn more true and bright. This little island, a mere boot button adrift in the ocean.²⁸⁴

Indeed, I was so taken with Henry that I decided to use a dual narrative – his perspective as well as hers. This tactic, I hoped, would create opportunities to present their different understandings and responses, enticing the reader into empathising with both.

For the physical experience of being on a contemporary frigate, I visited the *HMS Trincomallee*, a ship of similar age to the *Grampus*; it is shockingly tiny, and gave me some idea of the cramped conditions on board. I worked out a 'back story' for Henry - involving the consequences of his early love affair and his father's tertiary syphilis - that could explain some of his behaviour. Given the documentation from Byam Martin's own pen, and my family history of a similar class and connections (my father was a naval officer), I felt reasonably comfortable with his point of view. Although male, his class, nationality, social mores and cultural background felt familiar.

Atea was more of a challenge. My discomfort with my Tahitian character was linked to the lack of research material. Beginning this project by reading documentary material was sensible, but unsatisfactory. None of the histories, anthropological studies, missionary records, letters or diaries provided a first person account from a Tahitian woman. There are traditional stories, songs and myths that have been orally preserved, and eventually written down (sometimes by Tahitians), but these have an oratorical, ceremonial style. I learned

323. Byam Martin 99.

324. Perhaps other writers of historical fiction are similarly relieved to free themselves from the constraints of a contemporary aesthetic, for example Sarah Waters who allows herself expansive description in *Fingersmith* (2003) and *Tipping the Velvet* (1999).

325. Early draft of *Heaven On Earth*.

some Tahitian preparatory to my stay, but am more able to communicate in French. Once there, I spent most of my time with Tahitians, and tuned into the rhythms of Tahitian speech, which made me feel more confident about creating realistic dialogue.

However, as Henry's voice became easier to write, Atea's voice began to seem stilted, dull, simplified. One of the problems was that she was speaking in 'pidgin' English, so I decided instead to make Henry good at languages and put him at disadvantage by having him notionally speak Tahitian. This still didn't solve the problem of Atea seeming 'simple'. I didn't want to create a female character embedded in stereotypes of 'primitive' emotionality, in contrast to a male character demonstrating sophistication, intellect and 'civilisation'. I decided my Atea character was an experienced midwife, who was calm, grounded and good natured – her profession gave her status and skill. Because the shamanic approach is apparently simple, but difficult to communicate without extensive info-dumping, I wrestled with the problem of her seeming emotionless or harsh when she is dealing with things in an internal, shamanic way. I don't know if I've succeeded. Trying to work out why she killed her husband was another problem. As this was the reason why her face was tattooed, and I didn't want to change these minimal facts, I had to work out a scenario for such violence.

The more I looked for possible conflict in the Tahitian context, the more it melted away. Ancient Polynesians seemed to have a society designed to avoid internal conflict. There were hostilities between different islands and factions, but in the family there was apparently minimal potential for long term friction. If a child didn't get on with its parents, it could go and live with another family.²⁸⁵ If a couple become unhappy, they were expected to separate, with full social support for that decision. Although there were reports of physical fights between husband and wife, ongoing serious domestic violence was uncommon as either party could simply leave with full social support.²⁸⁶ The Tahitian ideal is that one does what one wants to do. Individuals could have lovers, or choose to live with one person monogamously. The challenge was to find a credible way to maintain a difficult relationship long enough for a murderous rage to emerge. There are no records concerning the reasons for this murder – or manslaughter.

Domestic violence is and was commonplace in Britain.²⁸⁷ Wives were expected to do their husband's bidding, and in nineteenth-century Europe they could be physically chastised

326. Henry 128.

327. Henry 68.

329. For further information and statistics, see Gill Hague and Ellen Malos, *Domestic Violence: Action for Change* (London: New Clarion, 1998).

legally.²⁸⁸ I decided that the trouble in the relationship between Atea and her husband could be exacerbated by a ‘contamination’ from European ideas about marriage.²⁸⁹ Combined with drunkenness, I decided that this hybrid ideology contributed to Temana’s increasing violent abuse, and Atea staying with him rather than leaving. This provides conditions the fight that leads to Temana’s death. However, I don’t know if this representation is credible, or makes her seem callous, and I cannot be the one to judge. Atea is not proposed as an ‘exemplary figure’; iconic, typical, or embodying stereotypical virtues or characteristics, neither is she regarded as identical to white women.²⁹⁰

The problem for me as a writer was whether I knew enough about what Tahitian values of the time might have been. So I decided to study Huna, the metaphysical spiritual ‘system’ of ancient Polynesia.²⁹¹ Huna knowledge has been passed down orally for generations and has only recently been openly discussed, so, given the absence of any original documentary material, Huna seemed the most viable way of getting some impression of beliefs operating in the nineteenth century. It is an experiential, metaphysical and shamanic way of perceiving the world. As research for this novel, I’ve spent nine years training as a ‘Huna’ shaman.²⁹² I’ve learned lomi lomi massage, how to do ho’oponopono and other ceremonies, including practices like hakelau and ahi. These practices have significantly changed my own perceptions and behaviours – I use shamanic techniques most days and this ‘system’ is highly influential in how I conduct my life.²⁹³ As a result, I feel more able to write Atea’s perspective, however illusory that may be. As I have not been able to live in Tahiti, nor have I located a teacher specifically of Tahitian shamanism, I transposed some of my Hawaiian-based shamanic learning to nineteenth-century Atea. While there are many broad similarities between Hawaiian and Tahitian cultures (presumably because of their shared origins), I am aware this is a problematic conflation, and an imaginative leap made

330. Picard 321.

331. Bhaba discusses mimicry by subaltern cultures in his chapter ‘Mimicry and Man’ in Lane (2013); and Spivak reminds us that subaltern identities are heterogenous in her classic postcolonial essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ Lane (2013); while Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin discuss syncretist and hybrid formations (1989).

332. See Margaret Homan’s ‘Women of Colour’ in Lane (2013).

333. There is some dispute about the use of the term, but it’s generally used. See Lee 89.

334. With Joy Hicklin Bailey, who trained in Hawaii, and acknowledges Hawaiian lineages of teaching.

335. ‘We attempt to story another being/phenomenon’s behaviour and commit to its journey, its coming into being and going out of being, to this story. We then alter our conduct, our behaviour, to facilitate a common journey’ Lee Maracle quoted in Lane (2001) 397.

for lack of specific available information.²⁹⁴

The text.

I open the novel with a prologue from Atea's point of view, jumping straight in with her experience of childbirth. This subject is key to the novel and eventually provides a 'bottom line' where mutual understanding proves impossible between the two cultures. I hope that the description of her labour establishes a specific cultural context in a personal way. Chapters 1 and 2 provide the contrasting perspective of Captain Henry as he arrives in Tahiti. This is a fairly obvious perspective, but provides an opportunity to point to Henry's conflict about expressing sexuality. By putting the Atea section first, I hope that readers will identify with her primarily, rather than as a secondary foil to the white European point of view. Chapter 3 presents Atea as a mother and a woman with a problematic husband. She is ordinary, experiencing emotions that are easy for the reader to understand. Atea talks to her friend Miri much as any woman might, and is relieved when her husband at last arrives, sober.²⁹⁵ A degree of 'info-dumping' is used as lightly as possible to indicate Tahitian attitudes to relationships, through Miri emphasising that Atea should leave and live elsewhere with her daughter. Atea is depicted as a reasonable loving person, empathetic and warm, experiencing a situation to which most readers could relate.

Returning to Henry, the reader is presented with a key culture clash. Some of the sailors are caught having sex with Tahitian women on board. The mismatch between his reaction and that of the women involved is plain. 'She greeted them in a voice quiet with dignity, as if nothing at all were amiss.'²⁹⁶ The woman's unperturbed response is incomprehensible to Henry. The numerous prostitutes of the nineteenth-century dockside may have been as pragmatic, but they would have been familiar with notions of shame.²⁹⁷ Henry is shocked and aware of his own horrified fascination. The different sets of cultural perceptions, moral frameworks and behaviours are set out in contrast to each other. Subsequently, when Atea realises Temana has taken their pouara, and that their relationship cannot recover from such a blow, she lashes out and kills him, in the context of a frustrating

336. Some cultural practices, because banned in Tahiti by missionaries, like dancing, have been re-introduced very successfully from Hawaii.

343. Bentham 23 -27.

346. Bentham 35.

347. Picard 310.

relationship, a devastating loss and a messy struggle.²⁹⁸ The murder is not excused, but presented. Atea does not try to hide from what she has done, justify herself, nor shift responsibility onto Temana.²⁹⁹ This re-inforces her later attitude as stringently moral within her own system. Moral codes are a cultural phenomena, and I hope to explore and demonstrate this throughout the novel by presenting different moral positions. At this point the focus is with Atea in prison. The framework of 'reality' is altered; the redness of the blood, the afternoon and the insides of her eyes are conflated in swift succession, with the gecko's surveillance as relentless as the heat and the grief she experiences. She is operating within a different framework of perception to Henry, but I want to present this as unsurprising. Atea isn't simply 'other' or weird or unknowable; she's a person suffering extreme emotion.³⁰⁰ When the soldiers rape her, she is presented as a victim, but I do not use words like 'rape', as apparently this was not a crime familiar to Tahitians, so she only has the immediate visceral experience of what is happening, without a social or legal framework within which to place it. Although a victim, she's presented as a capable, proactive character, even *in extremis*, who is using strategies to cope.

So far, Atea is presented as bystander, child, mother, wife and friend, angry woman in jeopardy and then incarcerated prisoner. I hope this establishes Atea as a person despite differences of period, place, gender or race. Her altered state is intended to establish a more Polynesian relationship with time. For Atea, what is in the 'past' can simultaneously exist in the present. Chapter 7 again presents dissonances of perception as, on their way to the Governor's house, buttoned-up Henry and Roberts are confronted by Miri.

Henry was tempted to bow, such was the ferocious hauteur of her carriage, but the sweat streaming down her face and the rumpled state of her striped missionary dress stopped him... He wondered if she might perhaps be mad. p.48.

Throughout the exchange with Miri that follows, the men are unsure whether she's deranged because her extreme emotion is so embarrassing to them. This encounter is the first time the word 'savage' is used in the text. 'What he saw was a sweating, tear streaked harpy with wild hair and blood spattered clothing. She looked every inch the savage – yet when he

350. Bentham 40-1.

352. Bentham 42.

353. Bentham 43-5.

looked into her eyes there was fear.³⁰¹ In the same sentence as the word savage, he relates to her as a fellow human. Ironically, as Henry makes judgements about Miri's dishevelled desperation, she is trying to convey Atea's beauty to him. He's disturbed by her appearance, yet her eyes connect him to her humanity. Miri uses familial relationships to indicate British responsibility, and promises. 'Your Queen big sister to our Queen. She promise to look after us – You big brother.'³⁰² Although Henry understands the emotionality of the person before him, he lacks the cultural context. He can empathise, comparing Miri to his most beloved relative – which shows his potential as someone capable of moving beyond his cultural conditioning through his empathic abilities. However, neither officer understands why Atea's punishment is 'unfair'. To them, a tattoo instead of a death sentence looks like leniency, yet Miri has a different, culturally determined, understanding of Temana's death. Henry and Roberts discuss what they think was happening, which provides an opportunity to unpack the cultural context a little more.

'Ellis wrote about it - they use a shark's tooth to strike themselves - did you see it in her hand? Apparently they do it with barely any provocation - if their child hurts itself – if someone dies.

p.52.

When they arrive at the Governor's house, the talk about 'natives' is similarly patronising, concerned with methods of subjugation and manipulation of 'natives'. Bruat is airily dismissive. 'Altogether, I thought the tattooing was an amusing solution. After all, why hang a serviceable woman?''³⁰³ This comment goes unchallenged as Atea's predicament is not important to Henry's diplomatic cause. Henry's discomfort is indicated; 'Bruat's last comment hung in the air like a wrong note,' and I hope to create curiosity as to how Henry will choose to behave.³⁰⁴ Through his responses to the Tahitians encountered so far, he's depicted as a man of his time and class, nonetheless observant and thoughtful. His outlook changes as he meets people, and because he has this quality of openness, the reader could hope he may question his own preconceptions. At the tattooing ceremony, colonial power enacts its dominion over the Tahitians symbolically, subverting a traditional art form and using it as a punishment. The location for this symbolic act is a woman's body. During this

355. Bentham 50.

356. Bentham 50.

357. Bentham 58.

358. Bentham 58.

ceremonial humiliation, the reader is party only to Atea's remorse and self-blame, while the white spectators are peripheral. The manner of the white people throughout lacks the basic courtesy that Tahitians expect, so the Tahitians are embarrassed on their behalf. Here I am attempting to create more empathy for the 'other' perspective of the Tahitians than for the white people, even though Atea is being punished for a murder.

The central symbol of this tattoo is key to the mutual misunderstanding of the Europeans and Tahitians. The Europeans intend the word to act as a warning, demonstrating their power – it's in English, and it subverts the usual Tahitian functions of tattoos to denote rank, genealogy, and commemorate worthy deeds. However, it's upside down, so it looks bungled and ridiculous from the European perspective. The Tahitians can't read, so to them its effect is only to disfigure Atea, while the European desire to destroy beauty is incomprehensible and doesn't relate to her deeds. Everyone knows what she has done, so the tattoo is superfluous. For Atea, the ceremony is an act of contrition. She submits because she feels responsible for her husband's death; throughout the tattooing journey of endurance she is not concerned with the tattoo's meaning.

Once again, Atea is used as a sexual object, but this time within a cultural 'framework' more familiar to her. Sex was sometimes used as a 'payment' for tattooing, but as the tattooing was unwanted, the extraction of such a 'payment' is another humiliation. There are a different set of Tahitian understandings about sex, so there is an implication that she may not attach the same importance to this as, perhaps, a European might.³⁰⁵ This is complex, and as with many other matters of cultural information, the novel cannot be a treatise on Tahitian sexual behaviour. These matters run through the novel thematically, and this incident indicates that, in this culture, sexual acts could have another context and currency.

In the following chapter, there's a contrasting glimpse of the tattooing ceremony from Henry's perspective. What he witnesses is disturbing, yet he notices the earnestness of the surrounding Tahitians – and guesses this is not the scene of depredation that it may seem. 'It didn't seem like a gathering of the righteous witnessing a murderer's comeuppance. It felt more like a respectful group come together to mourn, to witness, even to commiserate.'³⁰⁶ This shows he realises the discrepancy in possible interpretations. When Henry goes to Moorea, where he meets the Tahitian 'queen' Pomare, the dinner on board ship provides an opportunity to display many of the judgemental attitudes of Europeans regarding Tahitians; they dress in 'ridiculous' outfits to impress, they eat greedily and so on. These ethnocentric

359. Bentham 71.

360. Bentham 74.

judgements are moderated by Henry's response to Pomare as an individual. Despite the colonial setting, he does not stereotype all 'natives', and neither is he an 'exemplary figure' for his culture. Again, this foreshadows the possibility that he could question frameworks of understanding.

During the process of healing post-tattooing, Atea is tended by Miri using lomilomi massage.³⁰⁷ Although there is a lot of Tahitian cultural context in this scene, the focus is on a close friendship, a human interaction between two people. Again, linear time is confounded as during the lomilomi 'journey' Atea relives the birth of her daughter Hauata. Tahitian words like lomilomi are introduced in a context that I hope facilitates interpretation – but depicting the emotional journey simultaneously 'held' by both parties is not fully achieved. Later, when Atea wanders along the shore and waits for Henry, again, she responds to him emotionally. 'Now he stood before her as if the mana was squeezed out of his body.'³⁰⁸ Here, a Tahitian word is used without explanation; there is no easy translation – it means both physical and spiritual power and strength – but the context may convey enough. I decided to use words like this without clunky explanations, partly in order not to patronise the reader, and partly to give the reader a small taste of the same ignorance as that experienced by my characters.. Throughout the novel, I tried to choose the most interesting point of view from which to depict a scene, not privileging one culture over the other. I intend the choice of perspective to enable a fresh view, as when Atea visits the ship.

Those who'd been to the ship said there were caves inside where the many men ate, where they slept hanging from the roof like caterpillars.

p.114.

In both examples, Atea's interprets behaviour within her own framework of experience.

A dog ran behind him, close to his heels, small and soft, its fur the same colour as her skin. It called out in its little singing voice, long ears dangling beside its pretty face.

p.115.

She observes curious behaviour and belongings; knucklebones, hammocks, glass, paintings. Throughout, from Atea's vantage point it is the European culture that is alien and different, while her world provides the norm, thus avoiding essentialism. Readers may experience

361. Bentham 85-6.

362. Bentham 145.

some resonance in later scenes when Atea is bemused and horrified by the behaviour of the British, for instance, when she sees brutally flogged sailors. Modern mores have shifted so that brutal punishments are no longer considered acceptable. Overall, I hope to create no 'loyalty' to one cultural perspective over another; sympathies can shift, as can moral codes.

In the painting scene, Atea begins to feel attracted to Henry partly because of his difference – as a positive phenomenon.

His eyes were the stirred up blue of the sea before a storm. Blue was an odd colour for eyes – the airiness of sky, not the safe brown of the ground.

p.125.

To Atea, brown eyes are the norm; blue eyes are strange, but exciting. Henry is equally attracted by her 'otherness' later. Throughout this scene, Atea is piqued and delighted by the 'other', and at the end of it she is surprised by his sympathy. It could be argued that she is as ethnocentric as he is, in her assumptions about him. Henry is the 'other' here, and his ability to see Atea as a complex emotional equal shocks her. 'It was a picture of her, not a picture of a murderer... She was astonished that he could see her.'³⁰⁹ Henry is depicted as animal, out of control when he ends up howling in the forest. This is the first point at which any character is depicted as behaving like an animal.³¹⁰ Animal imagery is not limited to Tahitian characters.

A strange sound disturbed the space around him – shaking through the air. It was a wretched sound, a ragged wailing. It stopped when he drew breath. It was coming from him.

p.141.

As the relationship between Henry and Atea develops, their perspectives draw closer together. Henry is opened up more emotionally; he is vulnerable, and not always in control of himself or his situation. He begins to relinquish some of his investment in his own cultural perspective, but this is a slow, 'seesawing' process. Their cultural frameworks are radically different, but a process of repeated cultural and moral challenge has begun. In a deeply felt part of his persona, Henry is given the opportunity to alter or relinquish some of his culturally determined notions. All of this is offered to him by a woman who has expertise

363. Bentham 129.

364. The second instance is when Henry is reminded of his dog smelling the sea breeze as Nunui does the same. This memory is affectionate, and Henry makes a clear distinction between the animal's behaviour and Nunui's gravitas.

that he lacks. Although stereotypes depict Tahitian women as merely wanton, Atea is depicted as someone playful, powerful and skilful.

In later scenes, Henry's preconceptions continue to be challenged. Within his frame of reference, a world of spirits is not a possibility he wants to entertain. Although not a devout man, Christianity has forearmed him with an omnipotent and singular God plus an afterlife defined by Heaven, Hell and Limbo. Interest in the supernatural was prevalent in Britain during the eighteen forties, but I imagined Henry would have eschewed spiritualism.³¹¹ His notion of a Christian afterlife doesn't contain the interaction and communication that Atea finds unsurprising. Henry experiences Temana's spirit inhabiting a coco palm.³¹² For a sceptical reader, presenting spirits as unsurprising fact might provoke difficulties with credibility, so I present Henry's struggle to reconcile his experience with his intellectual understanding of it. The tu'papa experience gives Henry undeniable, visceral experience of the spirit world, simultaneously experienced by Atea. She knows how to respond, while Henry struggles with his beliefs; his desire to be sceptical is contrary to his own sensory experience. Henry begins to experience a different relationship between his body and mind, but I'm not sure there's enough passage of time for credibility here. The degree to which such perceptions can shift within the fictional timeframe may be a problem experienced by other writers.³¹³

The progress of his induction towards her world view is patchy and sporadic. When Atea tells her version of how Temana died, Henry annoys her by constructing the event as self-defence. His inability to accept her version becomes one of the difficulties in their relationship, a cultural difference that may be impossible to negotiate. European mores of the time dictated that women worthy of respect should be emotionally controlled.³¹⁴ The expectation in Henry's world was that women had minimal power, minimal passion and should control unruly emotions. However, for Atea's, passion is acceptable for both genders, and unwanted feelings can be managed shamanically. The lomilomi massage that Miri undertakes is part of this process of healing, and the later ho'oponopono ceremony is another

367. 'To a very large number of persons indeed, Spiritualism is in the most solemn and serious sense a religion.' Picard 356.

368. Bentham 200.

370. For example, in *The Forest Lover*, Vreeland gives her heroine a timeframe of several years to change her way of thinking.

371. 'Do not be tempted to offer, in your own person, those advantages of matrimony which are not available in his club. He is all too likely to obtain these too, elsewhere than at the domestic hearth.' Picard (2006) 125-6.

vital element, rather like a reconciliation process for everyone involved, including the dead man.³¹⁵ Atea and Henry's perspectives concerning killing, intention, fact, and aftermath are conflicted, just as readers' responses may be conflicted. Later, another culturally unpalatable behaviour is described: the wearing of eviscerated, flattened corpses as a kind of trophy cloak, which horrifies Henry. This example should indicate that I am not idealising Tahitian culture (as if routine infanticide isn't enough). In response, Atea is pragmatic, refusing to explain this behaviour except individually. Tahitians cannot be reduced to one set of behaviours and reasonings any more than Europeans.

As Henry increases his understanding of the Tahitian world, his identity is threatened by disintegrating cultural certainties. He relaxes into Atea's world, and when Roberts visits him on shore, feels at odds with his friend.

Henry felt the sadness of a great distance between them. In the past his own reactions would have been much the same as Roberts', but now his judgement had shifted.

p.228.

Henry's understanding of the world and his cultural certainties are eroded further in subsequent chapters, showing that there are more problems as he dismisses his own cultural framework - and Roberts' pleas for him to return to the ship. Because he is captain, the loosening of his cultural ties is potentially dangerous as it impairs his judgement. His judgement of Atea's behaviour remains idiosyncratic though; he does not 'cross over' to the Tahitian view that she murdered her husband but can be forgiven, instead he provides his own interpretation, that she acted in self defence. Atea believes in her own culpability yet is not vilified by her own community. Also, Atea can recognise the difficulty that Henry has in understanding her actions and intentions. I intend Henry's reactions and difficulties to duplicate those some Western readers may have. Even after Henry witnesses the ho'oponopono ceremony, he refuses to accept that she wanted to kill Temana, which throws Atea into doubt about his love.

This problem of how Henry perceives Atea returns repeatedly. Atea is totally responsible for her own actions – a quality that readers may find admirable. In the mid section of the book, Atea goes to the warrior camp in a proactive attempt to provoke some action, having realised the huge quantities of European ships through having been with Henry. It will be interesting to see how this is interpreted, and it replaces several chapters of 'Tahitian time' which were necessarily slow to depict a different pace and atmosphere of

373. Traditional Ho'oponopono is an extensive process including all involved if possible. See Len and Vitale (2007) 43.

Tahitian life. These chapters have been deemed too inactive, so the Eurocentric cultural imperative wins. Another scene inserted in the midsection shows Atea assisting at the labour of a woman she doesn't like, but who is nonetheless a woman in need of her skills. Again, I hope this will generate some appreciation of Atea – she is proactive and stoic, despite being unappreciated and unthanked. Her decision to help goes against the preference of some of her fellow Tahitians – there is no hegemony of opinion or preference just because of race.

Depiction of characters of another culture is fraught with this kind of difficulty – how to show 'other' moral values, belief systems and behaviours, when they may not be held consistently by all anyway. Cultural values are not held consistently in the West, and may also be transgressed or ignored by individuals or groups in other cultures. Later in the novel, the revelation of a lifelong practice of infanticide is likely to create strong negative judgements for Western readers, and while I do not wish to create any 'bad publicity' for past Tahitian culture, it does seem that infanticide was culturally endorsed. In anticipation of such negative reactions to Atea's behaviour, I try to create some empathy for her through experiences like rape by soldiers, and the death of a baby she could have kept. When she goes up to the rebel camp her interiority reveals her conflicted self-doubt, showing human frailty despite her bravery.

She'd died to herself when she'd killed Temana – who was she now? A murderer, a murderer. So she could risk herself, footstep after footstep. Although she was willing to die, as her feet walked up and up she knew the fear. But she was not more precious than all those men in the camp up there.

p.190.

I was surprised to learn that some readers found Atea's attempt to communicate with the threatened warriors a betrayal of Henry, which indicates an odd assumption that a Tahitian woman should be more 'loyal' to her recently acquired colonial lover than her mortally threatened own people. Second guessing the reactions of readers to the different moral and cultural choices is probably not useful for the writer, but I did depict Atea's response in a dialogue with Henry. 'They are my people – I am loyal to them. Is that a surprise to you? You've been with me for a few days, so you think I must not talk to my people?'³¹⁶

After the ho'oponopono in Raiatea, some reconciliation of the two schemes of perception is attempted. Henry tries to integrate his experience of the spirit world with his rational understanding - and is frustrated. Perhaps he can fit some beliefs into his existing scheme of perception, like ghosts, exorcism and life beyond the grave, but the totality of his

376. Bentham 198.

Tahitian experience doesn't fit. The two schemes of thought are difficult to reconcile, and threaten both Henry's established world and his identity as a rational man. When a storm approaches on their sea journey, his world view is further challenged. He's afraid, but expresses this as irritated frustration. 'Nunui was a great bird perched on the prow, moving his head back and forth as he droned, like a chicken crooning. Was he even sane?'³¹⁷ This is the third time an animal and human are compared in this novel. I was surprised when I realised I'd done this, but felt the comparison should stand. Henry howled like a dog when grief-stricken, and he was reminded of his own dog, with affection, when Nunui smelt the sea breezes. At this point the image underlines Henry's dismissive response to Nunui, but once Nunui gets the clouds to move, Henry is overtaken with fascination and respect. Although he cannot explain the shamanic work, neither can he dismiss what he has witnessed. Atea regards his behaviour with pleasure as he appears more respectful, and happier. At the same time, she has similar problems trying to understand him.

Throughout, I try to ensure that Atea is not the stereotyped colonial 'native'; passive, inactive or stupid. However, neither does she have a superior ability to manage her emotions, as evidenced by her killing of Temana. While Henry deals with the potential mutiny, Atea finds waiting difficult. When the Englishmen arrive to bury the dead, Atea ignores Henry's preference, and watches the burial with a mixture of bewilderment and horror.

He was different when he was with his men, but never like this.
 She'd never have loved him if this were all she'd seen of him.
 Sometimes chiefs have to do difficult things, she told herself,
 sometimes they need to be harsh.

p.293.

After this incident, she is called to work as a midwife. When Henry appears in the forest during the birth, she waves him away. Their perspectives are at odds; Atea controls the ensuing conversation with formality and dignity despite the charged emotionality, while Henry blunders on, still hoping for a fantasy future.

When Henry offers condolences for the dead baby, Atea is honest, and somewhat impatient, as she has previously told him about the demands of the god Taaroa. She's not prepared to dissemble to protect his preferred but inaccurate view of her. It takes a while for Henry to comprehend – quite deliberately, as some incredulity on the part of readers may be assumed also and it's important to unpack this crucial matter carefully. Tahiti is not after all a consequenceless sexual paradise. As Henry is accusing her of murder, Atea asks him

pertinent questions. ‘What did you think would happen to our babies?’³¹⁸ Her obligation to sacrifice is not presented as something done lightly, but it’s shocking to Henry. However, he has ignored the issue of potential pregnancy all along. Once again the moral tables are turned in that he has taken no responsibility for his own behaviour. Henry rushes on with reactive judgements while Atea challenges him further.

‘When you do something I don’t understand, I try to understand - that you are tapitane, that you have different ways... But when I do something you don’t understand, to you I am bad. Just bad.’
p 329.

Deflated, Henry is unable to cling to former moral certainties. He cannot easily reconcile his reactions, thoughts and feelings; his background and culture provide one perspective, while his lover and his own experiences have revealed another that is difficult to assimilate. As a writer, I want to propose that it is not as simple as Western rationality versus superstition and emotionality; there are many reasons why Atea’s perspective is just as rational and functional as Henry’s worldview, especially in terms of personal happiness. Without valorising Tahitian culture, I believe that it is in many ways just as civilised and sophisticated as a Eurocentric one, and I realise this may be hard for Eurocentric academics to accept as reasonable. The earlier quotation from Lee Maracle is significant here – there has to be a willingness to journey with the storyteller in order to understand the indigenous story.³¹⁹ Throughout this novel, there are vicissitudes regarding the culturally determined moral positions of both main characters. My hope is that readers may begin to feel some uncertainty about what is classifiable as ‘wrong’ or ‘right’ in different contexts, and the relativity and unreliability of fixed positions. I do not know if this is an achievable goal. It will be interesting to see whether this is achieved at all.

The last paragraph of the novel reveals the respect Henry retains for Atea's perspective. He begins to understand the shamanic practice that she’s been showing him all along, the welcoming of all states of feeling, including painful ones. He has learned to ‘allow’ his own grieving process. However, at the same time he is aware of his own naivety, and he remains conflicted - all is not finally resolved. Apparently good literary novels provoke more questions than they provide answers. I do not intend to provide any easy answers. The final chapter shows Atea using ho’oponopono techniques to release Henry: she

377. Bentham 251.

379. Bentham 328.

381. See earlier pages 32 and 93. Lee Maracle, quoted in Lane, *The Routledge Concise History of Canadian Literature* (2011) 204.

has a functional spiritual system that contrasts with the confusion in which Henry is depicted. However, she is still bereft, straining after the disappearing ship.

Chapter Eight - Conclusion

In this study, I hoped to improve my own writing by studying a talented writer working in a similar field. Examining Grenville's technique helped me reflect on my own craft as well as the subtext behind my writing. As in Grenville's work, there are underlying themes – women in society, expectations regarding women's roles, different relationships with the land, the bigger picture of colonialism, the usefulness of spiritual beliefs, and aspects of self-definition. The society in which we live is not the only choice, nor is it a 'norm' by which other societies should be measured. There are many valuable and useful aspects of other cultures from which we could learn, and that may require setting aside inherent notions of superiority. For this novel, I left my comfort zone. It felt like an ethical minefield, yet I wanted to write from the belief that most people (except perhaps sociopaths) can, or can attempt to, occupy the imaginative space of someone very different to themselves. Many questions are left unanswered, and the relativity of moral values is open to discussion.

Grenville has followed a trajectory of increasing 'closeness' to the indigenous perspective. Her trilogy has framed the historical issues from the white perspective, presenting the potential first step, via the admission of guilt, in the process of reconciliation. *The Secret River* has facilitated discussion, and made the admission of some guilt more feasible for modern (white) readers. Australians have a sensitive political climate in terms of indigenous issues, and Grenville errs on the side of causing no harm if possible. Wishing no harm is not the same as not causing it, so I respect Grenville's caution. Tahiti has a different political situation, and as I am not a well known writer like Grenville, I have less to risk. I am cheered to reflect that the relationship between my main characters might be possible in this century, and that the ethnocentric ignorance depicted in my novel and Grenville's, although not gone, is changed, still changing, and challenged in intellectual, political and policy arenas. My intention was to try to depict different cultures more even-handedly. In Huna, intention is key, but we cannot know the possible interpretations and results of what we put out into the world. Nonetheless, I do not assume that my methodology is 'better' or more ethical than Grenville's. If I could live in Tahiti for five years I might be more confident that I have represented nineteenth-century Tahitian perspectives; but we cannot ever definitively know that we understand someone else's point of view, and in this case it's not possible to check. Grenville's choice not to enter an unfamiliar perspective is probably more sensible than my necessarily compromised attempt to ventriloquise figures so historically and culturally distant.

Final Thoughts

The stories we tell each other matter. I believe that what we choose to tell, who we choose to focus on and how we do that contributes to creating our culture, and creating consciousness. All the material that is published and made becomes part of the culture – and all of it contributes to how we conceptualise our world, and therefore how it actually is. This is just as true of historical fiction that is consumed by a contemporary audience as it is of fiction set in a contemporary milieu. Open, non-totalising texts could contribute to political and social debates, and form part of a process of change.

In retrospect, I'm glad that I didn't read post colonial criticism before writing my novel. Self-consciousness – especially 'politically correct' trepidation – is not helpful for me when working creatively. Neither is it possible or desirable for writers to try to secure ethical safety; our orientations will be revealed through our writing whether we're aware of it or not, and we cannot cleanse ourselves of all conscious and unconscious prejudice and stereotyping. What historical fiction can do is re-interpret the past in a contemporary light. This is a process, not a question of achieving a fixed and 'correct' final view, and it reflects how we see ourselves, and how we might like to see ourselves. We have come a long way; we have much further to go. In Jonathan Lear's ethical philosophy *Radical Hope*, centred on the Crow Nation, he suggests that in order to have human hopefulness, and hopefulness for the Crow in particular, a new Crow poet is required – one who can take up the Crow past and 'project it into vibrant new ways for the Crow to live and be'.³²⁰ 'The possibility for such a poet is precisely the possibility for the creation of a new field of possibilities. No one is in a position to rule out that possibility.' More and more people of indigenous descent are poets, academics, writers, artists and activists, and perhaps they are creating such possibilities. I'd like to give an indigenous writer the last word. With reference to the depiction of the era of first contact, Kim Scott says it's important 'not to be trapped by being engaged only in polemics.'³²¹ He hopes that indigenous people will be able to 'take on literature rather than just suffer the burden of oppression.'³²²

388. Jonathan Lear (2006).
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008) 51.

386. Kim Scott speaking on BBC Radio 4's *Open Book*, 21.10.2012.

387. Kim Scott, *Open Book*, 21.10. 2012.

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