

MAHINA

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JACK DEY

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Dedicated to: Papa
For Your Honour and Your Glory

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Author's Preface

This novel is a work of fiction. Whereas the historical facts have been a major influence in the writing of Mahina, any resemblance to incidences or characters living or dead is coincidental. Poetic licence has been used in this fiction.

I hope you will enjoy reading it,
as much as I have enjoyed writing it.

Jack Dey

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ONE

FEBRUARY 1855

The sweat trickled down his back. His cloudless complexion burnt easily, even after nearly twenty years in this abominable tropical Australian sun. His short breeches, long white stockings and cascading ruffled shirt identified him as a gentleman, even if he had not been in proper English society for nearly two decades.

Even now, he remembered his father's tone and scolding tirade when he declared his plan to set his future upon the church. Today was one of those days when he wondered if his father had been right.

His father carried through with his threat to disinherit him, once his plan became reality. All was settled upon his amiable younger brother, leaving him with a fare aboard a colony ship bound for Australia; a wardrobe of clothing; and a meagre grant from the English government, enticing would-be settlers to try their fortunes in the new land down under, with no possibility of returning to England or society.

Even if he wanted to.

The schooner had tossed and dipped on its way to Australia for near on three months. His countenance had on more than one occasion turned puce and caused him to re-evaluate his journey with much regret.

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The ship was to make an unscheduled stopover on its way to the Sydney town, at Thursday Island, on the northern most tip of Queensland. The thought of further delay and another extended journey aboard the endless dipping and rolling of the schooner caused him great despair. Still, the chance to recuperate and stand upon dry unmoving ground appealed greatly.

The occasion finally arrived when the schooner came alongside a makeshift anchorage and the passengers were shuttled to dry land aboard the long boats. He first set foot on T.I., as the scant local white population called it, almost twenty years ago to the day.

That was when he felt the pull of God on his heart.

A wiser person would have fought against the thought of making Thursday Island one's permanent home. He recalled his thoughts, but there was no time to reconsider.

He watched from the seashore as the three masted schooner made headway into the open turquoise sea, the sails in full bloom, driven by the southeast trade wind.

He struggled with the wisdom of his choice, but he had made his decision. His future would now be reliant upon his own desire to succeed and he was to suffer defeat or success amongst the native people, as a consequence of his own choices.

He had been true to his heart and to the God who had called him.

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His work for the past twenty years amongst the native people of T.I. had paid off. His instruction on the love and saving grace of a personal God had caught on like wildfire, with many accepting Jesus as Saviour and Lord. He delighted

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as many turned from tribal cannibalism and worship of evil spirits, to Jesus.

A peace settled over T.I. and the work spread, bringing balm to the hearts of many people, including his own.

He had spent many hours in personal instruction of the new native converts. Warrammarra was not only a convert, but a close friend who had shared much of his experiences among the native people.

Being a local born native man, Warrammarra had kept him safe from many of the cultural pitfalls and had devoured the instruction given him, veraciously.

Warrammarra was always talking of his Jesus, to whoever would listen.

When the preacher had asked Warrammarra about their close neighbours, the New Guineans, he had felt the urge to travel across the open sea to New Guinea and present the people there with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The New Guineans were likely a lost tribe of people, hostile and unreached, practising all forms of unnatural rituals. Cannibalism and spirit worship was certain and they were in need of the Saviour's hand.

The decision was made to sail there in whatever form of sea transportation that was at hand, which could make the journey across the normally quiet and calm sea crossing.

It was left in God's hands as to whether they survived or not.

This encounter with the local New Guinean natives would likely be all out acceptance when they met them, or reviled as intrusion into their timeless world.

Time would tell.

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The tiny, wooden sail boat they had sailed from T.I. to somewhere on the shoreline of New Guinea, had been battered the previous night by an enormous monsoon storm, threatening to swamp them at every turn. It reminded him of the storm the apostles fought, as Jesus slept in the back of the boat. The outriggers dipped and pierced each new treacherous wave and his praying did not cease.

He remembered the months of misery and misadventure aboard the schooner, only this time, the waterline was so much closer and the waves more of a menace.

He felt the calming hand of God upon his heart and he was much in appreciation of Warrammarra's company and seamanship during the week-long voyage.

From the tiny sail boat, the sighting of land and rainforest covered mountains dipping down to the sea, brought him back to himself.

The white, sandy shoreline with its impenetrable rainforest backdrop, disappeared in each direction as far as the eye could see. The tips of the mountains were covered by dark foreboding cloud and the humidity caught in his throat, as if he was fighting some dark force for each breath. The sun would break through the cloud barrier, like some sort of crazed demon that burned itself into his head and through his shirt. Frequent, drenching rain showers blotted out the sun and made the humidity give way momentarily, only to come back with a fierce displeasure and restore the fight, for breath and shelter.

In the heat and humidity, his mind hankered after another time. The memory of his native England had faded over many years. White Christmases; fur lined riders; a galloping curricle; reddened cheeks from the icy wind; being wrapped up in warm clothes and playing in the snow.

Oh, to feel cold again.

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In his current home it was either hot, or hotter.

A sting of homesickness embedded itself in his mind. These memories were not helpful in the current situation. He had to shake it clear from his thoughts.

That was another person, another lifetime.

Finally, they dropped the makeshift sail and beached the wooden boat up on the sandy shore. Their limbs were stiff and unwilling to move at first, after long periods of cramped inactivity.

Scanning their surrounds, they began looking for a way to breach the thick rainforest barrier barring them from entering the jungle, behind the rim of the seashore. The thickly entwined palms, vines, trees and shrubs made it impossible to penetrate the shoreline leading back into the jungle without a machete.

They found a trail, well worn and disappearing beyond, into the darkest part of the dense vegetation. The thick, humid air grasped at their throats, while torrents of sweat ran down their backs.

They entered the trail and immediately, an intense foreboding beguiled their journey. It was certain that a deep sense of intrigue was about to encompass their efforts to locate the local peoples.

The trail wound its way through thick, dense jungle. The vegetation closed in overhead as if walking through a green tunnel. In the distance, birdcalls of an exotic nature, unrecognisable to their understanding, played out like some demented choir. The trail turned up towards the mountains and began to climb steadily. The humidity was oppressive, competing with their lungs and the sweat poured out from their bodies, in great purging rivers.

Swarms of mosquitoes vexed them at every step, biting the exposed parts of their skin with such tenacity and stealth that a

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well aimed blow would despatch a dozen or more of the creatures in one slap.

WOOSH....WHOMP!

A small feathered arrow buried itself deep into the preacher's heart.

He stumbled backwards against his friend, blood and life escaping his form.

“GO! RUN, WARRAMMARRA! I am as good as dead. Save yourself and remember the cause of the Gospel, my friend.”

WOOSH...THUNK! THUNK! THUNK! THUNK!

Another volley of arrows narrowly missed Warrammarra and embedded into close by trees. Bark splintered, sending white sap showering like spittle through the air.

The preacher went limp.

Warrammarra took off at high gait, shock encompassing his body. Adrenaline kept him in full flight. His heart hammered, whilst his legs pounded wildly, carrying his body, dipping and weaving along the dense jungle trail, heading back to the shoreline. His lungs were screaming in the densely thick, humid air.

Suddenly, he burst out onto the beach, located the little sail boat and swung it around out into the surf, hoisted his body up and landed heavily inside the small craft.

Warrammarra pulled the sail tether tight and the little boat moved swiftly out into the emerald green sea, the sail taut and in full bloom.

Warrammarra steadied himself against the wooden seat, pulling hard against the force of the wind on the sail tether. A volley of arrows dropped harmlessly into the sea, a long way short of the little boat.

A group of New Guinean warriors covered in tribal regalia, gathered on the beach looking out after him. The light

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coloured paint against their dark skin and bones through their noses, gave them the appearance of great evil. Colourful feathers removed from large birds decorated their bows and spears and made a fearsome headdress.

Warrammarra's heart violently pounded in his chest. His temples ached. He felt nauseous and the world around him swam. The sail tether slipped from his hand and he fell into unconsciousness.

TWO

PRESENT DAY

The faded blue paintwork of the converted trawler *Annemarie* made him wince. He could not afford to paint her again. She was a sixty foot, forty year old fishing boat and in her heyday she was the fastest and tidiest vessel in the northern fleet.

Since the government had cracked down on the fishing industry and developed great allotments of marine park in the lucrative fishing grounds of the greater north eastern coast and Torres Strait, Damon and most of the other vessel owners had fallen on hard times. His misfortunes continued, until he had to sell his fishing licence, just to keep his beloved *Annemarie*.

He peppered his disdain for his demise, with large toxic amounts of alcohol, that should have killed any other man. In the morning, he was clear headed again and at the helm.

Damon was known amongst his peers as a tough, no nonsense skipper. He prided himself on his skill and ability to conquer and tame the sea, in any of her moods. His crew did what he said, without question, otherwise it was a long way to swim, as some of his past crew had found out. He was a tall, dark haired man, built on solid muscle, with a face worn hard by continuing battle with the sea. He looked a lot older than his thirty eight years. He had a knack for sniffing out trouble

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and on more than one occasion had to use his fists to clear his nostrils.

Below decks, *Annemarie* had a good sized galley; sizeable cabins along the port and starboard sides, fitted out with bunk beds; a common toilet and bathroom; and plenty of room undercover. All in all, she could comfortably accommodate ten people. Her hull was a deep vee, all steel. And she cut through the water like a well sharpened knife. Perfectly at home in the roughest of seas.

Damon was reduced to running *Annemarie* on joyrides into the Torres Strait for rich tourists. It pricked his pride and irked him to have rich boys climbing all over his boat. Still, it was money, even if he had to play along with these snot noses. They paid to keep his vessel in the water.

Today was a strange charter. A young woman had hired his boat and his crew to take her to Bathurst Bay, on some secret mission. She had paid cash up front.

There was a mythology amongst the fisherman of the Torres Strait. To anchor in Bathurst Bay, was considered bad luck. It all stemmed back to some cyclone that had snuck up on the pearling fleet in Bathurst Bay, a hundred and fifty years ago and wiped out the fleet anchored there. Legend has it, at night, when the south east gales come, you can hear the souls of the lost, crying out for help in the pitch darkness.

Damon shook the thought from his mind and wiped his mouth, immediately accepting the young woman's cash. He had not seen so much money in cash for a long time. The destination would remain concealed from the crew, for the moment. He did not want them getting spooked and abandoning ship.

After all, if he didn't take the charter, someone else would.

The woman was covered head to toe. Khaki, long-sleeved

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shirt, long pants, hat and sunglasses. He wasn't any good at guessing women's ages, but if he had to take a stab, he would say twenty five.

"Mister," she said.

"Damon," he replied.

"Damon, let me get something up front, straight away. I am chartering your boat for a specific purpose. I will not tolerate any interference in my business. I expect you to keep to your business. Are we agreed?"

Damon's hackles went up, but he swallowed them back down. After all, she had paid good money for the charter. "Whatever you say, Miss...?"

"Elishia. Elishia will do fine."

He helped her onboard, had one of the crew show her to her cabin, while the others stowed her gear.

It was nearing mid morning when Damon eased *Annemarie* from her berth on Thursday Island. It was close to high tide, so there was plenty of water in the south eastern channel. If he was delayed a couple of hours, the tide would be too low and he would have to take the western channel. That would add nearly a hundred nautical miles to his journey. He had taken on fuel, food and water the day before, in anticipation of the voyage.

The crystal clear, emerald green waters of the Torres Strait, still took his breath away, even after twenty years.

He was doing what he loved and that was all that mattered.

Horn Island was to starboard. He had been involved in a lot of fights there, usually at the local bar, sitting minding his own business. A drunk local would recognise him and want to settle a score. It was a rough place where the dregs of the earth seemed to inevitably find a home. He did not care for the uncivilized rough-necks that hung around, looking for trouble.

Thursday Island, however, just twenty minutes across the harbour by boat from Horn, was civilized and comfortable, with a family feel to it.

A contrast that he did not understand.

The other islands surrounding Thursday Island were primitive and sparsely inhabited. Usually by people looking to escape something, or someone.

The harbour at Thursday Island was a naturally occurring safe haven, protected by Hammond Island to the North; Palilug Island to the North-West; Gialug to the South-West; Muralug to the South; and Horn to the South-West. Several tidal channels allowed shipping to enter and leave the harbour safely at high water.

Annemarie's engine, just above idle, pushed the sixty foot vessel slowly through the calm waters of the harbour. Damon steered her into the South East channel and pushed her throttle forward to wide open. *Annemarie* dug her stern in and the bow lifted, like a racehorse given its head, unlocked from its stall.

Elishia was standing against the railing at the bow, just staring into the expanse of emerald water. Her long, auburn hair danced crazily behind her in the wind. She was directly in front of Damon's view, as he skilfully orchestrated the vessel's controls. He found himself staring at her form and there was no doubt, she was a stunner.

Annemarie burst out of the South East channel and was now in open water, the swell gently rocking the vessel, like a mother lulling a child to sleep.

Damon pushed the buttons on the chart plotter: 14 degrees 25 minutes South, 144 degrees 23 minutes East, set, enter. The apparatus beeped, as it accepted the instruction. Set auto pilot, enter. Another beep. *Annemarie* was acting on her

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own now, which left Damon to attend to other things.

The voyage would take 12 hours.

Damon opened the wheelhouse door that led to the forward deck, where Elishia was standing. He startled her when he spoke and brought her back to herself. She had been a long way away and judging by her facial reaction, he was intruding on some sacred moment.

“Beautiful, isn’t it? The sea, I mean.”

She nodded.

“I don’t mean to intrude, but you...”

“Damon!” she interrupted, in a low voice that he had to struggle to hear, “I thought we had this discussion before we left T.I.”

His dark eyes narrowed, as he met hers. Fury burned and he turned and stalked away.

THREE

BRISBANE 1872

As he approached the tiny cottage, he could hear the sounds of his mother wailing. It was true. The people at the school house had told him to go home, to comfort his mother.

“Your father has fallen overboard, from the merchant ship he was working on.”

Stunned, he wanted his mother to tell him it was all a mistake and that his father would come through the door as he always did, at the end of each voyage.

The young boy burst through the cottage door, eyes alight with a thousand questions. His mother began wailing louder and pulled him to her chest.

Kenneth Davis was only fourteen years old, the youngest of two boys and older brother to six sisters. Because of their frequent moves, in a constant search for a pot of gold, he had completed only two years schooling. Now, the two boys would have to leave any thought of education, to support the family.

What would they do?

His thoughts kept tumbling around and tripping over each other. Grief, worry, a sense of hopeless loss. How he needed the strength of his father’s arms, his kind words and his soothing presence.

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The tiny cottage they lived in was right next to the sea shore. Ken could hear the tireless crashing of the waves on the beach, as he tossed and turned in his bunk bed, trying not wake the eight other people sleeping close by.

The sea was the author of his grief, yet it comforted him, ever gently beckoning, pulling him into its embrace.

Like his father, Ken loved the sea. He always had. If he could not find work, or enough work, they would be homeless.

Ken's love for the sea had drawn him to the docks and gain a position aboard a supply vessel. His mother, still grieving for her husband, absolutely forbade Ken from accepting the position. The thought of being away from the sea stabbed at his heart.

He had lost his father. He was determined he would not lose the sea.

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Mason's foundry was across town, a good half hour's walk from the cottage. Ken walked in through the gates and asked for the owner.

The noise in Mason's foundry was deafening. The crude tempering furnace kept the large, closed-in area on the boil.

It had been a month now since old man Mason had laughed at his scrawny build and pointed to a large, steel headed, forge hammer, saying, "If you can swing that hammer boy, I'll give you a start."

Ken took the hammer into his hands and with every ounce of energy, strength and determination, hoisted the hammer above his head unsteadily and pounded it down on the ground, narrowly missing old man Mason's feet.

His face was red with the effort, but he had done it.

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The shifts at the foundry were long, fourteen hour days. His job was to remove large pieces of glowing, red hot steel from the tempering furnace and beat them into a rough shape. He didn't know and he didn't care what the shape was for. He just wanted to earn enough to keep his family from being evicted. Ken's labour at the foundry was only enough to keep the landlord happy and his brother earned enough to put a small meal on the table.

In short, they were dirt poor.

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After months of tirelessly attending his work, he grew stronger and stronger. He would throw open the heavy furnace door, reach inside with gloved hands and a pair of long-handled furnace pliers, shielding his face from the heat with his other hand. He hooked onto the glowing metal shape with the pliers, dragged it out onto a forming anvil and beat it, like he was killing a poisonous snake. He would then hoist it into the cyanide pit for case hardening, hissing violently, as the hot metal met the cold liquid concoction. Over and over, he would repeat the same operation.

The job that took an hour when he first started working, was taking fifteen minutes now and he was getting faster. He was starting to outperform some of the men and old man Mason had noticed.

"Davis! The boss wants to see you."

"O..ok!"

Ken pushed the door open to Mason's office, his face still red from the heat of the furnace, hair wet with sweat which ran down to his soaked leather apron.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

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“Yes, come in, Davis. I have noticed that you have outpaced some of the men and you have increased the output from the tempering area. You show great promise, boy. So I am taking you off the floor and putting you in the office. I will train you on the business side of things.”

Panic showed on the boy’s face. “I have no schooling sir and I can’t read or write.”

Mason’s face did not change. Ken found it hard to read what old man Mason was thinking.

“I will teach you all you need to know. The rest is up to you. If you are not the young man I think you are and if you can’t learn the business after three months, then you can go back into the tempering area.”

Mason saw the relief flash across the boy’s face.

“Thank you sir. I will do my best.”

Mason’s thoughts tantalised his mind. Indeed you will, boy. Indeed you will.

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Mason’s tutelage was exhaustive. He showed Ken all the business angles. How to haggle for contracts and come out with the better end of the deal. How to read the rival’s face, while keeping his own face emotionless. Never giving anything away, while he was dealing. Every deal Mason did, Ken was right there, learning, taking it all in. If Ken would miss an angle that Mason used in a deal, he would be blasted with vitriol. Ken hated disappointing Mason and would scold himself for every mistake.

He learnt well from his respected mentor and hung on every word, every action.

The speed and skill at which Ken learned his trade

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surprised even Mason and he congratulated himself on such a fine choice.

Ken was eighteen when he landed Mason a government contract to manufacture ship parts. A lucrative contract. Every angle, Ken had covered. The government negotiators were on the back foot and tied up on every point, to Mason's benefit.

Ken became ruthless and Mason prospered from his efforts.

It wasn't long before Mason introduced Ken to the card tables. He applied his trade at the gambling houses and walked away with much more than he came in with. The ladies soon attached themselves to this young genius and the good times began to roll. Ken was too smart to lose his head to alcohol, even though he did enjoy a glass or two.

He began to enjoy the pretty things that came with success and position. His family moved into a bigger house, just down the road from the tiny cottage. Ken was doing well with Mason.

He would often come home and sit on the beach and listen to the sea's soothing beckoning. The sea had helped him endure the loss of his father. He would often try to see his father's face in the eye of his memory, but all that would come into his mind, was old man Mason.

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Nine years had passed. Ken became restless at the foundry and longed to court his long-time mistress, the sea. He had heard a lot about the fortunes being made at the Palmer River gold rush, some one thousand miles north from Brisbane and also at the Torres Strait pearling grounds, 400 miles further north again. Everything he touched turned golden.

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It was his turn to build an empire.

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Taking passage aboard a newly launched steamer, he headed for the Torres Strait to see for himself. The voyage was to take a full week. Plenty of time to take in the beauty and tranquillity of the sea.

The steamer was crowded with dignitaries and members of the gentry. Although Ken was accustomed to rubbing shoulders with these high and lofty people, he had no idea of dining protocol. His first thought was to get the cabin boy to bring him his meals in his lodgings. As he thought about the trap this would be to his enjoyment of being ship-board, he decided to hustle his way through. Let them laugh and scoff if they want!

The head butler led Ken to a table that already had a party engaged and announced with a loud plumb-in-his-mouth voice, "Mister Kenneth Davis!"

The party stopped their conversation and welcomed him to their table. Ken sat down next to a gentleman in his forties. The gentleman bowed his head and introduced himself.

"I am Robert Jennings."

FOUR

MARCH 1855

Nirrimi easily climbed the steep, grassy hills behind her home on Thursday Island and stood looking out across the open sea. From her vantage point, she could look in all directions, as far as the eye could see.

A build-up of monsoon cloud hung heavily over the ocean towards the north, back lit by the hot, tropical afternoon sun.

“A storm is coming,” she said quietly to herself, “and it looks like a lot of rain.”

She squinted hard, scouring the horizon like a light beam from a lighthouse, looking for a sign.

Anything.

Anything at all. Nirrimi’s stomach churned. A tear slipped from her dark eyes, down her ebony cheeks and onto her lips.

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Aunty Rosa was a huge, round, elderly native lady. Before she met Jesus, she would carry around a tree branch. Just the right shape and length to assist the young hooligan bucks to learn respect for the community elders. On more than one occasion, when she was challenged by a would-be hero, the tree branch would be applied to the ‘shinier parts’ of the would-be’s

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proud heritage, his lesser courageous friends, laughing hard from the safety and seclusion of a nearby bush.

Aunty Rosa would take a step towards the bush and an explosion of arms, legs and bodies would ricochet in all directions, escaping that dreaded branch.

After her experience face to face with the Lord Jesus, soon after the preacher arrived, she softened and used her enormous reserves of love to inspire wayward juveniles. She was Aunty to all local people. Black and white.

Well known and well loved.

Aunty Rosa's concern for Nirrimi was growing each day. Like this one, she made frequent visits to the little hut where Nirrimi lived, just down the dirt road from her own hut. She was just resting on the porch step, when Merinda ran up to her.

"Aunty Rosa, have you seen my Mummy?" Merinda asked.

Aunty Rosa felt a pang of pain. "No child, but I suspect she has climbed the hills behind us, to search again. She will be back soon I am sure."

Merinda's face dropped and she began to cry. Aunty Rosa snatched her up in a huge bear hug and took her inside the hut, fully aware of the cause of the child's distress. She held Merinda for a long while, allowing her to empty the tears and let some love flow into the child's worried heart.

Through her sobs, Merinda asked, "D...do you think my Daddy is ever coming back?!"

"We can only pray, child. Jesus knows."

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As she entered her home, the unexpected sight of Merinda crying, nearly completely covered by Aunty Rosa's embrace,

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was too much for Nirrimi. The strong, protective walls she had put up to protect herself, crumbled and the dam of emotions burst. Aunty Rosa drew Nirrimi into her embrace too and they all cried together.

Emotions flashed through Nirrimi's mind. She pulled herself away from Aunty Rosa. There was no holding back the tsunami of hurt, now it had been given freedom.

Sadness, grief, anger, hatred, betrayal and love, all fought each other for a place on Nirrimi's stage. Aunty Rosa was expecting the next scene and braced herself for it.

"I knew that white preacher was bad news, when he started talking against our traditional spirits!" Nirrimi said crossly. "All this talk of the white man's God and Warrammarra swallowed it. Now look where we are. Warrammarra is dead! I have no husband and Merinda has no father!"

Nirrimi broke again and sobbed. Deep, broken hearted sobs. "I begged him not to go to our enemies," she whimpered, "with that white man, to talk of the white man's God!"

She slipped to her knees on the floor, her arms folded across her chest and began rocking back and forth, crying, coughing and sobbing, her back and chest heaving violently as each new wave of grief hit her.

Aunty Rosa put her large hand on Nirrimi's back and prayed silently for her, as she wept. Merinda placed her arms around her mother and prayed silently, as well.

Nirrimi's tirade had exhausted her. Gradually her sobs subsided. She slipped gently to the floor, became still and fell asleep.

Carefully, Aunty Rosa picked up Nirrimi and placed her on her bed to sleep and took Merinda back to her home. The large woman's heart was breaking for Nirrimi and Merinda. She began to ask Jesus why.

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She felt him gently say, "All in my time Rosa. All in my time."

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The sudden thunder clap woke Nirrimi with a start. Her mind was foggy and her head ached. The rain was teeming down on the roof and it was an effort just to hear her own thoughts.

She looked around the room, dazed and disorientated. It was getting dark and the humidity made it seem as if it was 100 degrees inside. Merinda, she guessed, was with Aunty Rosa.

Nirrimi washed her face and dried off the tear stains. She felt strangely cold, even though it was so hot. Aunty Rosa would want Nirrimi to stay with her tonight. The thought brought her great comfort. She looked around again at the familiar place. The memories here for the moment, were tormenting her heart.

The traditional thatched huts had given way to the wood and tin structures, brought with the coming of the Europeans. A small percentage of Nirrimi's people still lived in the traditional huts, but most had changed to the white man's way. The wood and tin structures did not leak in the torrential rains. The preacher had helped build their own one room place. Aunty Rosa's place was identical, built by the preacher also.

Nirrimi closed the door to her hut and ran determinedly, dodging large puddles and jumping over others. Aunty Rosa's hut was only a hundred yards away, but she was soaked by the time she lunged onto the small porch.

As usual, Aunty Rosa's door was wide open. An invitation to visit, to anyone passing by.

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Aunty Rosa met her at the door with a dry blanket and Nirrimi began to dry off.

“Come inside, child. Come inside.”

Merinda had wrapped herself around her mother’s legs and they both held each other for a long time.

Walking into Aunty Rosa’s place was like walking into a smile. It cheered your heart and filled the empty spaces with warmth. On the small table, lay an open Bible. Judging by the delicious smell coming from the cooker and the plates in the cleaning basin, Merinda had been well taken care of. Nirrimi’s stomach began to make overtures, wanting to meet the delicious smell coming from the cooker.

“Are you hungry, child?” Aunty Rosa asked.

“Mmm!” Nirrimi said.

“Sit, sit and I will bring you something.” She placed the meal on the table in front of Nirrimi, kissed her on the forehead and went outside. Merinda followed.

Nirrimi glanced warily at the open Bible as she sat down, as if it was a snake about strike at her. She ate hungrily, glancing at the Bible with each new spoonful, making sure it had not come any closer. Warrammarra had tried to read to her from it, but she had flatly refused. Merinda would sit on her daddy’s knee, mesmerised by every word her father read.

The storm had worn itself out and moved on. Merinda was asleep on Aunty Rosa’s lap as she sat on the porch, humming a traditional lullaby and staring at the stars.

Nirrimi, having finished her meal, gently picked Merinda up, out of Aunty Rosa’s lap. Merinda stirred, as Nirrimi took her inside and placed her on a mat on the floor, which had been put down for them both to sleep on. She kissed her daughter, once for herself and once for Warrammarra, gently pulled the thin blanket over her and Merinda slept peacefully.

JACK DEY

Nirrimi had never known her mother and for as long as she could remember, Aunty Rosa had been there. It was Aunty Rosa who did all the motherly things and she loved her as her own mother. Nirrimi sat down alongside Aunty Rosa, still staring at the stars.

“Tell me something about my Mother, Aunty.”

Aunty Rosa shifted from her position, staring at the stars. She looked intently at Nirrimi as if coming to a decision. The traditional people never spoke of such things. It was taboo to speak of the dead, or even mention their names.

“That is a bad story, child. Such a waste of a dear life.”

“Please, Aunty!”

Aunty Rosa took a deep breath, her dark eyes reflecting the starlight. “It is probably time,” she mused.

She began.

“About thirty years ago, a small band of New Guinean warriors arrived by canoe, unwelcomed onto our island. Your mother loved wandering alone around the island, observing and enjoying the natural creatures and flowers. She was gentle, a lot like you. She happened to be close to where the warriors had landed, in a deserted place not many went. They saw her and took her. Eventually, she saw an opportunity, broke away from them and ran back towards the camp. One of the warriors shot an arrow into her shoulder. Our men, armed with spears and clubs, found the intruders and killed them.”

Nirrimi shifted uncomfortably on the porch. “Please, go on.”

“It wasn’t evident what they had done until you were born, nine months later.”

“I am part New Guinean?!” shock covered Nirrimi. “Did she die giving birth to me?”

“No, child,” Aunty Rosa said sadly.

MAHiNA

“The day after you were born, a large storm hit the island. Many shelters were wrecked and some of the fishermen were caught out in it and never returned. The people blamed your mother for bringing evil onto the island and upsetting the spirits. According to protocol, the only thing that could appease the angry spirits was a human sacrifice.”

Nirrimi gasped. “My mother?!”

Aunty Rosa paused, watching Nirrimi.

Nirrimi struggled to gain composure. “What a day today has been!”

Aunty Rosa said, “That is enough for now.”

“No, please go on, Aunty!”

Aunty huffed. “You were left to die, so I took you in. The elders were not happy, but they were not game to come near me and my tree branch.”

Nirrimi giggled, her heart swelling for the wonderful woman sitting across from her. She sidled over and threw her arms around her adoptive mother.

Leaning against Aunty, Nirrimi pondered, “Do you think they were right about the storm and my birth, Aunty?”

“No, child. Your mother died for a lot of superstition. That storm was just a coincidence.”

“What makes you so sure, Aunty?”

“I met the white man’s God.”

FIVE

MARCH 1855

Nirrimi squirmed on the porch next to Aunty. Although the sun had gone, the heat and humidity surrounded them like a damp sheet. A thousand questions formed in Nirrimi's mind, only to be chased away by others vying to be heard.

Finally, Aunty broke the silence.

"When the preacher came to the island, he started telling our people about Jesus and how He was the Creator God and how we all are sinners and that we needed to believe on Him to escape eternal condemnation and separation from God. How He was beaten, mocked and nailed to a cross of wood for our sins and left to die."

Nirrimi's face contorted, as she mentally pictured the man's demise.

Aunty continued, "Nirrimi?"

"Yes."

"He did it for love. For you, me and anyone who would listen."

Compassion and sorrow flashed across Nirrimi's face. Then it was chased away by indignation and anger.

"We have worshipped the spirits for as long as we have been here and they have always looked after us," Nirrimi

challenged.

“It was the spirits that demanded a sacrifice when you were born,” Aunty replied quietly, with a pang of hurt.

Nirrimi went silent.

“I was like you, indignant, when the preacher started his teaching on Jesus. In fact, the elders were going to capture him and sacrifice him to the spirits. I was in agreement with the elders and joined with them in their plan. We were going to take him the next day.”

“What happened?!” Nirrimi asked.

“After the elders had gathered and talked through the plan, it was agreed that none of the people would go near the preacher, until our men had bound and gagged him and taken him to the place of sacrifice. We planned to ambush him the next morning. The plan was circulated amongst our people and we would take him on his morning walk, near the deserted places. He would be away from the other white people and no one would come to his rescue. He would simply disappear.

“That night, I went to bed and I could not get the image of Jesus hanging on the cross, out of my mind. I dreamed of the preacher screaming in pain. It was an awful night. I tossed and turned. Sometime before dawn, there was a flash of light that woke me up and bright light filled my hut. A man in brilliant, white light appeared at the end of my bed. He was beautiful. The kindest eyes I have ever seen and I was surrounded by a love and peace I cannot explain.”

Aunty paused, as if she were remembering. Tears began streaming down her face. “He said, ‘Rosa, don’t let my family crucify me again. I have come to release my family from the bad spirits.’”

Aunty went quiet and her shoulders began to tremble. Nirrimi cuddled into Aunty and held her for a long time

JACK DEY

before speaking.

“Aunty?” Nirrimi asked softly. “How do you know this was not a trick of the spirits?”

Aunty spoke ever so softly. “He showed me the nail scars.”

Nothing was said for a long time. Both women just stared out at the night sky. It was too peaceful to speak. Something sacred had passed between them and a presence of deep love and power hung over them.

It may have been hours that passed as Nirrimi sat with Aunty, basking in the love and peace that surrounded them. Nirrimi’s eyes were getting heavy and she needed her bed. It had been a draining day. There was still a multitude of questions running through her mind, but they would have to wait.

She yawned quietly and kissed Aunty on the cheek. “I love you, Aunty. I am going to bed.”

“Sleep peacefully, child. I am going to stay a while longer, here.”

~~*~*

Aunty Rosa woke with the sun, as she normally did. The night had passed peacefully. Nirrimi and Merinda were still asleep. Aunty Rosa smiled at the two precious people almost side by side on her floor, Merinda’s arms and legs hanging over her mother, half in, half out of the blanket.

The sun had a strong sting, even for this time of morning and was quickly heating up the small hut. The humidity hung like a damp cloth over them. Aunty Rosa hummed to herself, as she quietly went about preparing breakfast.

Merinda stirred. Untangling herself from her mother like a miniature escape artist, she smiled and waved at Aunty Rosa

MAHiNA

through a tangle of dark locks hanging over her face. Auntie put a finger to her lips for her to be quiet, so Merinda would not wake her mother and then blew a kiss to the waking child.

Nirrimi coughed, opened her eyes and stretched. Her face was soft and radiated a peace Auntie had not seen before in Nirrimi. She looked around as if looking for someone.

“Good morning, child,” Auntie said.

“Good morning, Auntie. Wow! What a dream! What a night!” Nirrimi exclaimed.

Auntie Rosa turned to face Nirrimi, the light of knowing twinkling in her eyes. “Well, child, tell us what happened!”

“It’s true! It’s all true. I saw Jesus and he showed me His hands and feet. The nail scars. He was just as you described him, Auntie. I felt His love sweep me up. And those eyes...!” Nirrimi paused for a moment, recounting the dream, playing it and replaying it in her mind. “He showed me how deep His love for me is.”

Nirrimi jumped up from the floor and twirled around the room. Merinda giggled and wondered if this was the same mummy who had gone to sleep next to her last night.

“He held out His hand to me and I took His hand in mine. We were flying through the clouds and suddenly we arrived at a place filled with sunshine. There were rainbows and colours and streams of crystal clear water. Children laughing and waving at me. They were of many different nationalities and colours. There were happy people everywhere.”

Nirrimi danced again.

She suddenly stopped and a cloud crossed her happy face.

“The preacher was there! He took me in a hug and said, ‘I am so happy you met Jesus.’ I asked Jesus if Warrammarra was there. ‘Not yet,’ He smiled. I was just about to ask Him about Warrammarra, when he took my hand again and we were

flying.

"We landed in another part of the dream and a woman about my age ran up to me and hugged me. She was beautiful and she said she was my mother. We danced and talked and hugged, till Jesus said it was time to leave. There were so many questions I wanted to ask my mother. Jesus said, 'There will be plenty of time, later.' He took my hand and we were flying through the clouds again.

"I said to Him, 'I don't understand, Jesus. My mother never had a chance to know you. She died before the Gospel was brought to my people. How did I see her in Heaven?'

"He smiled, His eyes full of love. 'There is a passage in my book, dear one. Romans 1:19 and 20. The truth about me is known instinctively. I have put this knowledge in their hearts. Since the creation of the world, people have clearly seen the earth and sky and all I have made and have known of my existence and great eternal power. She knew of me by the wonderful things I put around her. She called out to me in faith. She did not know my name, until we met. Your mother loved me, knew and accepted me and my sacrifice for her on the cross. She, too, saw and understood the meaning of the nail scars. She found the path to me through her love of my creation.'

"Jesus brought me back here and hugged me. 'I love you Nirrimi,' He said.

"What about Warrammarra?!" I reminded Him.

"Trust me!," He smiled and was gone."

Breakfast was full of happiness. A joy pervaded the room. Nirrimi could not stop talking about her new found Saviour and all she had seen.

A question she had been longing to ask Aunty came into her mind.

MAHiNA

“Aunty?”

“Yes, child?”

“What happened with the preacher? Our people planned to sacrifice him!”

Aunty leaned back in her chair. A cheeky smile formed on her lips and she began.

“Well, child! I woke from my dream like you did. I marched straight down to the elders and told them the first man to touch the preacher would have me and my tree branch to contend with. I guess a large woman like me, with a shining face and a tree stump in hand, must have got the message across. Many of our people came to visit me and I told them about Jesus. Including Warrammarra!”

SIX

PRESENT DAY

“Are you mad?!” Charlie challenged. The heated words were permeating from Damon’s cabin out into the galley, though the door was closed.

“I would have to be, to put up with you, for so many years!” Damon retorted.

“It’s because of that woman, isn’t it? See a pretty face and a shape, and your brains turn to mud. Do you have any idea of the situation you have put this vessel and your crew in, taking on this charter?!” Charlie spat.

“That is all superstitious garbage and you know it, Charlie!” Damon quipped.

Charlie grabbed at the door. “The reason I was attracted to you, apart from the obvious, was your good judgement, gut feeling and cunning with the sea. Your crew followed you into places others would not go. We trusted and respected you. Now this!”

Annemarie's engine, at full throttle, made it difficult to hear in the galley. The engine noise would radiate from the engine room two decks down, through the steel hull and into every part of the vessel. Today, however, the crew had no misgiving as to what Charlie and Damon had said.

They had heard every word.

MAHiNA

The door to Damon's cabin swung open violently, crashing against the wall. Charlie's padded frame flounced from the cabin. Her stringy, sun-bleached, blond hair hung on her collar and her face was deeply tanned. She looked older than thirty two. She walked swiftly into the galley, crashed through the rear galley doors and out onto the aft deck. Just out of view of the other crew.

Charlie had been with Damon for ten years. She had stood beside him through some of his roughest times. She had shared his work, his heartaches, his celebrations and his bed. She was no oil painting, but she was a faithful mate.

Charlie and Damon had argued a lot recently. Especially since Damon had to sell his fishing licence just to keep *Annemarie*. His excessive drinking made him more argumentative and at times, even Charlie was afraid of him.

They had argued furiously when Damon decided to fit a galley alarm. An expensive computerised device, that sounded a raucous siren in the galley if anything went wrong in the wheelhouse.

One of Damon's respected peers, on a vessel similar to *Annemarie*, had set his chart plotter to the exact co-ordinates of his mooring inside a protected marina, a few hours from his current position. He set his auto pilot so the vessel would remain on the course and speed selected. Then he let the vessel take over. He turned to do other things, slipped and hit his head. He was out to it.

None of the crew suspected there was anything wrong. They were not aware that the skipper was unconscious and things went on normally, until...!

The vessel, still on auto pilot, still at full speed and still on its set co-ordinates, ploughed into the marina's refuelling wharf, killing all onboard.

JACK DEY

If a galley alarm had been fitted, the radar and GPS limits would have set off the galley alarm, in plenty of time to warn the crew and stop the vessel.

Damon thought, that could easily happen to anyone, no matter how careful they are.

The galley was the dining area and kitchen all in one, where the crew came together to eat. The area was below decks and roughly the size of a large conventional bedroom. The wheelhouse was directly above the galley. A steel ladder connected the wheelhouse and the galley, via a steel hatch.

The kitchen was separated from the dining area by a partition wall. The wall had a central doorway but no door. The port side part of the wall had an open window cut into it, with a shelf for serving cooked food to the table. On the port side of the kitchen, was a large stove/oven; two microwaves and a large two-door fridge. Steel storage cupboards for canned food lined the starboard side.

The dining area had a large wooden table in the centre of the space, surrounded by ten wooden chairs. The cabins were on the periphery of the galley and the doors all faced inwards, towards the dining table. The galley was the largest area on the vessel, where everyone could be together all at one time.

Morita Hiroto was *Annemarie's* cook. Everyone just called him Johnny. He was an old Japanese man, somewhere in his seventies, tiny in stature and still speaking broken English, even though he had been in Queensland most of his life.

Johnny had been with Damon from the beginning and Damon protected him ardently from any rough housing from the crew.

Johnny heard the argument and watched Charlie crash through the galley doors. An all too common occurrence now.

“Missy Boss an’ Skipper argue, no good, no good.” Johnny

said quietly to himself.

The hot afternoon sun was starting to set and It was getting dark. They had been underway now for almost nine hours and Damon was looking forward to dropping anchor in three hours. The leeward side of Pipon Island was their intended anchorage and a beer would be his reward, after a long watch.

There was no moon tonight, making it easier to see oncoming vessel lights in the dark, particularly the pesky novice yachtsmen that seemed to be everywhere, these days.

Damon spent most of his time in the wheelhouse, only coming out for a short break every now and then, while Pooch, his engineer, stood watch.

The sea was calm and the air outside the wheelhouse was considerably cooler, now they were four hundred miles further south. The gentle swaying of *Annemarie* was making it hard to keep awake. Damon much preferred it when *Annemarie* fought the waves and cut her way through the larger swells, making it difficult to stand without holding onto something.

The hatch behind him suddenly creaked and Johnny entered the wheelhouse from the galley. The wheelhouse was dark except for dim green lights coming from the radar screen and the vital instruments.

“You like coffee, Skipper?” Johnny asked, as he closed the hatch and squinted to accustom himself to the dark.

“Yeah, thanks Johnny,” Damon replied. “I will need all my faculties sharp, to keep my eyes peeled for other vessels now.”

Johnny placed the cup on the console next to Damon.

“I go make dinner for others now, bring some for you too, later.”

“Ok, Johnny. Thanks.”

The hatch opened and flooded the wheelhouse momentarily, with the light from the galley. Damon squinted

JACK DEY

in the sudden light and then it went dark again, his eyes constantly staring out at the darkness, where the horizon should be.

He was looking for signs of light, warning him of the presence of another vessel. While the horizon was dark, all was well. He checked the radar screen, glanced over the instruments and checked the chart plotter for his position.

All was going smoothly.

In the darkness, Damon's mind kept replaying his attempts at breaking the ice with Elishia and her deliberate snub. It had been playing on his mind, when Charlie burst into their cabin and took him to task over the charter. He did not mean to be so terse with her. She always did get jealous when there were other females onboard.

He wasn't sure if he liked this bossy Elishia woman and her secrecy anyway. Why did she keep her surname secret?! And what did she want in Bathurst Bay? She must be up to no good, he thought.

Damon had reduced his crew from ten to five. He kept the best and let the rest go. With the charter work, there was no need to have a full crew. There were no nets to run out or long lines to bait and retrieve.

No fish to process.

Charlie could be argumentative at times, but she knew *Annemarie* just as well as he did. She was his girlfriend, after all.

Johnny was his cook. He was like a father to him, always full of encouragement and a kind word, even when Damon's blood was up.

Pooch was his best mate and *Annemarie's* engineer. The team work between them was like a well oiled machine, each anticipating the other's thoughts, especially in an emergency. They had been through some times together, long before

MAHiNA

Charlie was around. He gathered that she knew what they were like and only walked away when they boasted of old times. Usually after a night of drinking.

Pooch knew engines like the back of his hand and could fix just about anything with a piece of wire.

Charlie once asked him why he was called Pooch.

Damon laughed and spoke for him, "He has a nose for wheeling and dealing and could sniff out a deal, a mile away."

Damon and Pooch could have been brothers. They looked similar, had similar builds and thought alike.

Knots was a tall, skinny kid that Damon took an immediate liking to. He wasn't skilful with his seamanship, but what he lacked in skill, he made up for in enthusiasm.

He acquired the name 'Knots' when he tied up the boat to a mooring once. The knots he tied came loose and *Annemarie*, seeing an opportunity to go off on her own, drifted away. No one was onboard at the time.

Damon, seeing *Annemarie* from the beach, drifting from her mooring, plunged into the sea and swam after her.

Knots was not allowed to secure anything with rope, any more.

Johnny had a bronze metal bell, hanging just outside the rear galley doors on the aft deck. When he wanted the crew to come for meals, he vigorously pounded the bell with its metal tonsils. The sound, easily carrying to all parts of the vessel even when she was underway, alerted the crew when a meal was prepared.

Johnny pounded the bronze bell and Knots arrived first, from somewhere in the darkness, closely followed by Pooch and Charlie. They pushed open the galley doors, sat down at the wooden table and began to consume the hot food set before them.

JACK DEY

Johnny walked over to Elishia's cabin and knocked on the door.

She replied, "Just a minute!"

The door opened and Elishia stood in the doorway, blocking Johnny's view of her cabin, an expression of 'why-have-I-been-disturbed' on her face.

"My name Johnny, Missy. Would you like some dinner?"

"Would you bring me a plate of something, please. I am busy at the moment," Elishia replied.

"Very well," Johnny said.

Damon checked the instruments again and noticed the engine temperature had started to climb. It wasn't significant, but it worried him just the same. *Annemarie's* instruments never moved from the normal position. Maybe something has been sucked into the raw water inlet, he thought.

Damon always did his maintenance. A break-down at sea could cost you your life. He would get Pooch to take a look at it after dinner.

He was just leaning over, checking the chart plotter, when *Annemarie* suddenly dipped. The engine began straining. She surged back up to power, then dipped again. He reached over to neutralise the transmission lever, but the engine choked and died.

SEVEN

PRESENT DAY

The galley alarm blared in their ears, as plates slid off the table and crashed to the floor. Johnny grabbed onto the stove, to stop becoming the first Japanese missile launched inside a charter boat galley.

Charlie grabbed onto Pooch's arm, the fear showing in her eyes as she faced Pooch, trying to keep from being thrown across the table.

Pooch jumped up from the table, easily ascending the stairs to the wheelhouse in three easy bounds, Charlie seconds behind him. Pooch broke through the metal hatch into the darkened wheelhouse.

The sounds of multiple alarms and flashing red warning lights beeped and flashed in the darkness, painting an eerie kaleidoscope on the wheelhouse walls and Damon's worried face.

Back in the galley, Knots was turning in circles, wondering what to do, when a frightened Elishia burst from her cabin, demanding to know what was happening. It was evident her cabin had suffered from the sudden surge from *Annemarie's* engine.

Johnny prised himself off the kitchen stove and made his way over to Elishia.

JACK DEY

“All will be ok, Missy. Skipper have it under control.”

The galley was strangely quiet, now that the main engine was stopped. The power generator could still be heard steadily, delivering power to the stricken vessel, a faint hum through the vessel’s hull.

The hatch from the wheelhouse opened again and Damon, Pooch and Charlie all made their way into the galley. The wheelhouse lights had been turned on. The alarms and warning lights had been silenced.

“What’s happening?” a white-faced Elishia demanded of Damon, as he strode past her through the galley and towards the aft deck.

“I don’t know yet,” he replied, his voice disappearing out of the aft galley doors, Pooch and Charlie close behind him.

The engine room was accessed through a door in the air inlet duct, on the port side. The air inlet duct towered above and was part of the aft deck and made up a part of the galley wall, also.

The purpose of the air duct was to ram clean, cool air in vast quantities into the engine room, via giant suction fans. They were encased in the duct work on the engine room floor, keeping the engine room cool. The hot, waste air was forced out, through openings in the sides of the roof of the engine room.

Damon turned the handle on the engine room door and pulled it open. The sudden noise of the power generator assaulted his ears and incoming duct air blew his hair around. He swung his foot over onto the perpendicular ladder and descended the two deck levels onto the engine room floor, closely followed by Pooch and Charlie.

There was no apparent reason for *Annemarie’s* trouble.

Damon shouted in Pooch’s ear.

MAHiNA

“I AM GOING TO START THE ENGINE FROM DOWN HERE AND SEE IF WE CAN SEE ANYTHING!”

Pooch just nodded and gave Damon the thumbs up. It was pointless trying to talk.

Damon walked around the engine, located the engine's remote starter panel and turned the key, to start the engine. The engine burst into life. He opened and closed the throttle manually, via the linkages on the engine. She responded quickly to the manipulation of the throttle lever and increased or decreased her engine's R.P.M.

Her gauges all read normal.

Pooch motioned to manually engage the transmission. Damon engaged the transmission, but the prop shaft did not turn and the engine laboured. Pooch pointed up, beckoning Damon upstairs. They climbed back up the stairs, out of the engine room and closed the door behind them. The noise suddenly quietened, allowing them to speak again.

“What are your thoughts, Pooch?” Damon asked.

Pooch responded, “There is something wrapped around the prop shaft.”

Charlie gasped.

All of a sudden, it made sense. The sudden engine surge, as whatever it was, wrapped tighter and tighter around the propeller and the propeller drive shaft. The engine choked, trying to wrestle with the slowing propeller shaft. Finally dying in defeat, as the prop shaft refused to turn.

Damon walked to the stern and looked down over the back of the boat, into the inky black water, below. The waterline was only three feet away.

Charlie and Pooch followed his steps in the darkness, with their eyes.

Someone had to go over the side and have a look, Damon

thought.

“Come on up to the wheelhouse. We need to make a plan, Pooch,” Damon said.

They pulled on the glass galley doors and entered the galley. They were met by three enquiring faces, sitting at the table. Johnny had managed to calm Elishia and Knots, by placing cups of hot coffee in front of them.

Elishia was the first to speak. “What’s happening, Damon?” her voice quavered, as she fought to hide her fear.

“We think there is something tightly wrapped around the prop,” he responded tiredly.

“Can it be freed?” she asked.

“We are just about to sit down and make a plan,” he replied resentfully. For the first time, he looked directly into her pretty face, noticing the darkening lines around her eyes. “It looks like someone will have to go over the side and have a look,” he shifted uncomfortably.

“Out here?! In the middle of the night?!” she exclaimed, horrified.

Charlie stared at the redhead, biting back the contempt and envy. If it wasn’t for you, she thought, none of this would be happening!

Damon replied, “We might not have any choice. We are fifteen miles east of Morris Island and these waters are littered with reef. Shallow enough and sharp enough to rip *Annemarie* open. With no engine, we have no way of manoeuvring around the reef. We are currently in the deep waters of the shipping channel, but the channel is only narrow through these parts and disaster is everywhere outside the channel. If we continue to drift on the incoming tide like this, we will most certainly end up on a reef. If we send out a distress call, it may be several hours before we can be taken under tow and the same thing

may happen.”

“What about the anchor?” Elishia enquired.

“We are in about a hundred and fifty feet of water at the moment. If we drop the anchor, it may just hit bottom. There wouldn’t be enough angle on the rope, to allow the sand ploughs to dig in and it would just drag,” Damon explained, matter-of-factly.

Damon motioned for Pooch to follow him into the wheelhouse, before Elishia could detain him with more questions.

Damon and Pooch thrashed out a plan for just on half an hour. They checked their position, drift, water depth and radar for any approaching vessels. They were on their own.

They decided to check the damage to the prop, before radioing in to the authorities. A last resort. If the damage wasn’t too bad and they could fix it themselves, they would forego a tedious Marine Safety Queensland inquiry and they could continue with the charter.

According to his tide chart, they were approaching high water.

Good timing, Damon thought.

With the tide at high water, the tidal current would stop for around twenty to thirty minutes. *Annemarie* would not drift far, buying them some time before the tide turned and began to fall again. The current would pick up speed once the tide started to run out again, making it difficult for a diver to stay under the hull of *Annemarie*, without being swept away by the current.

“Run out speed on a falling ten-foot tide, would give us a drift of fifteen to twenty knots,” he calculated.

Annemarie would drift too fast and there was a lot of reef around here, he thought to himself.

JACK DEY

Time was short.

Damon said to Pooch, "If we use the old net lights above the aft deck, that should throw enough light on the water, for you to keep watch for anything nasty. If I tie a waterproof torch to my belt, that should give me enough light to see under the boat, to the prop shaft. I think I can hold my breath for about two minutes at a time. I will have to feel around, to get an accurate idea of the damage."

Pooch replied, "Damon, I don't think it's wise for you to do the dive. I think I should go. If anything happens, you are the skipper and you are needed onboard."

They began to argue about who was going to tackle the dive, discussing the pros and cons, when Damon said, "We'll toss a coin."

Pooch won.

Pooch slapped Damon on the back, "Better luck next time, mate!"

Damon reached into a locker behind his seat and brought out his shotgun. There was a sizeable coil of rope there, as well. He would tie one end around Pooch's waist and the other back onto the stern railing. That way, if Pooch got into trouble, he could tug on the rope and be pulled back up.

The crew followed Damon and Pooch out to the stern.

Elishia returned to her cabin and closed the door. I can't afford any part of this, she thought.

Knots flicked on the powerful, old net lights. They threw eerie shadows on the gently rising and falling swells, directly behind the boat. The light beams penetrated the sea surface for about ten feet, sending light prisms streaming down into the darkness.

A fearful unknown existed beyond the reach of the beams.

The rolling movement of the swells gave the light beams a

MAHiNA

smoky, swirling appearance in the water. Tiny fish were attracted to the light and chased the light beams, darting to and fro. Beyond the powerful light, it was dark.

So dark, you could feel it.

The sky was illuminated by starlight and the night air had a faint hint of coolness. The aft deck was covered in semi darkness, just behind the reach of the powerful beam, the light falling on the sea behind *Annemarie*. The galley threw enough light through the glass doors onto the aft deck, to carefully pick your way around.

Damon tied one end of the rope around Pooch and the other around the railing. Pooch tied the torch to his belt, pulled off his shirt and kicked off his shoes.

EIGHT

PRESENT DAY

“How deep it here, Skipper?” Johnny asked, from the shadows of the aft deck.
“About a hundred and fifty feet, Johnny,” Damon replied.

The crew peered into the inky blackness under the boat and Damon told them to keep a sharp lookout for anything that moved. Damon loaded two cartridges into the shotgun and slapped the breach closed, his eyes scouring the darkness.

Pooch lowered himself over the side, took three deep breaths and disappeared under the boat, the rope gently feeding from Charlie’s hands, as Pooch went further under.

The seconds seemed like hours, the crew, tense and quiet, straining to see anything unusual.

Charlie jumped, as Pooch’s head popped up and blew out the air he had trapped in his lungs. Pooch gasped, pulling in new air.

“It’s an old fishing net and it’s tightly wrapped around the prop shaft,” Pooch gasped again.

“A ghost net!” Damon said, angrily.

Pooch grabbed hold of the deck rail and heaved himself back onboard.

“Man, it’s creepy down there! I can only see a foot in front

of me with the tiny flashlight and the rest is by feel. I can see a curtain of light towards the stern from the net lights, but that fades out about ten feet down and the rest is just... blackness!" Pooch exclaimed.

"If I take a sharp knife down with me, I think I can cut the net free enough to loosen it. By the feel of it, it is pretty old and slimy. Then we can start the engine and try unwinding the net, by putting the transmission into reverse," Pooch pondered, as his breathing returned to normal.

"Sounds like the plan," Damon remarked.

"How much time before the tide starts to run out?" Pooch asked.

Damon checked his wrist watch, pressing the little button to illuminate the watch face. "About five minutes."

"We had better get a move on, then," Pooch retorted.

Damon ran back to the wheelhouse and found his diving knife in the shotgun cupboard. It was old and the scabbard was discoloured, but it still had an edge that would make most filleting knives look blunt.

He ran back to the aft deck and handed it to Pooch, still in the scabbard. Pooch tucked it into his belt, next to the torch lanyard.

"Let's hope this works," Pooch said.

Pooch lowered himself back down into the dark water, smiling at Charlie as he flipped on the torch, breathed deeply three times and disappeared. The rope gently pulled from Charlie's hands, as Pooch went further under.

Time was fast running out.

The seconds ticked away. One minute, then two. It was almost three minutes, when Pooch's head popped up, blowing and gasping, his face tinging blue.

He gulped several long breaths as the colour returned to

his face, all the while treading water, to keep his head above the swells.

“I think I’ve got it enough to try it, but I will need one more dive to check, once we put *Annemarie* into reverse,” Pooch gasped.

Pooch heaved himself back onboard, while Damon ran to the wheelhouse, started the engine and put her in reverse. The engine strained and began to die. He pushed the throttle all the way open.

“Come on, baby, come on!” Damon pleaded with *Annemarie*.

There was a sudden surge, the engine picked up speed and *Annemarie* shot backwards. A loud cheer came from the aft deck, as the crew celebrated. Charlie threw her arms around a wet Pooch and kissed him on the cheek. Damon shut down the engine, raced towards the aft deck and threw his arms around Pooch. The tension had released and relief was written on all their faces, even in the semi-light afforded by the galley lights.

“I have to go back down one more time and make sure the net is released properly, otherwise she might do the same thing again,” Pooch warned.

Damon did not like the thought of another dive, but he also knew the wisdom of what Pooch had said. “Pooch, the tide is starting to fall and the current is picking up speed. You will find it difficult to stay under the hull,” Damon said, worriedly.

“Will be just a quick look and I’ll come straight back up. If I start to drift, you can pull me in with the rope,” Pooch declared.

Damon reluctantly agreed.

Pooch lowered himself over the deck rail, into the watery

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blackness again. The current was pulling hard at his body. He took three deep breaths, his eyes caught Charlie's, he nodded and he was gone.

The rope pulled out faster from Charlie's hands than before and then suddenly stopped. Pooch was in position.

The seconds ticked by, the crew tense with concentration.

One minute gone, then two minutes.

The rope suddenly jerked hard in Charlie's hands, throwing her off balance. She fought hard to hang on to the rope and Damon reached over her, to steady her from being pulled into the water. She let go when the rope began feeding through her hands so fast, it burned, horror written across her face. Damon tried to grab the rope and stop the fierce feed out, but it just burnt the skin from his hands.

The rope suddenly came to the end of its length, snapped tight like a piano string, pulling down hard on *Annemarie's* stern and then just as suddenly, went slack.

Damon pulled feverishly at the rope. There was no resistance and it came in easily. The frayed end suddenly appeared and dropped onto the aft deck.