

WHEN DANGER
LOOMS WHO DO
YOU TRUST?

PIRATE
BOY
of SYDNEY TOWN

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Angus&Robertson

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CHAPTER 1

ENGLAND, 1809

The land was gold: fields of wheat that met the pale midsummer sky, the stalks rippling as the men moved through the crop, cutting with their scythes or bending to gather it into stooks. Ben ran from group to group with the other boys, taking the workers flasks of cold tea or doorstops of bread and cheese. Mama had taught him that a good landlord worked alongside his men. He glanced at the stooks of wheat, the sweating men and his excited friends — Tugger, Lugs, Young Lon. This was the most important work in all the world. This was their harvest, all of Badger's Hill working together. This wheat would become sacks of flour, and the flour would become bread to feed each person here, as well as distant others.

Old Barney took the flask from Ben, drained it, then gazed at the final, shrinking stand of wheat. 'Thank

thee, Master Ebenezer. We's nearly done, I'm thinking.' He grinned. 'The good bit comes now.'

Ben grinned back. He returned to the carts with the empty flask, then raced back to form a wide circle around the last stand of wheat with the other boys. The men moved in, closer, closer, their scythes slashing. The stand of wheat was only three yards wide now.

A rabbit dashed out under Tugger's feet. 'Get 'im!' he yelled.

Young Lon and Lugs grabbed at it, but Ben had it first. He raised the rabbit triumphantly as it wriggled to get free, then quickly dislocated its neck and dropped it. More animals fled from the final cover in the field — rabbits, a scatter of mice, a hare. The boys darted, grabbing, cheering, adding to the pile of furry animals.

And the last of the wheat was cut.

Ben glanced at the pile of small animals. Their meat belonged to the boys who'd worked the harvest, even the rabbit he'd caught. But his catch had been the first! For a moment he thought he would float away with happiness.

He looked up to find Old Barney beaming at him, his six remaining teeth long and yellow. 'Harvest Home feast tomorrow night, eh, young master? The mistress got them puddins boilin'?'

Ben laughed. 'Puddings by the dozen, and jam tarts and apple pies.'

This was the tradition. A year of hard work, and then master and workmen feasted together, sang together, laughed together. This was the way it had been for the six hundred years Mama's family had owned Badger's Hill; since Ben's ancestor, Sir Roderick Montclair, had tripped on a badger's hole, laughed, then claimed the land around it as his own.

Tugger nudged Ben. 'Ain't fair that boys is left out of the feast,' he muttered, too low for Old Barney to hear. 'We worked too.'

'Aye,' said Lugs indignantly. 'We should have our own feast.'

Ben glanced at the men clambering onto the carts with the scythes. He grinned again. 'All right. I'll see to it.'

'How?' demanded Lugs.

'You'll see. Meet me at moonrise at the oak tree behind the barn tomorrow night,' said Ben softly. 'Tell the other boys.'

'Girls too?' suggested Tugger.

'Course not,' said Lugs. 'And anyhow, girls can't climb trees.'

They ran to get their share of the harvest animals. Ben watched them go, the boys he had grown up with: tenant farmers' sons, workmen's sons. Then he looked across the spreading fields fenced with hawthorn hedges, and up to the tall honey-coloured stone of the house he lived in on the crest of the hill, with its orchards, its

outbuildings, and the clustered cottages of the workers, each with its rose bush and neat lines of cabbages and potato plants. Badger's Hill. Home.

The barn smelled of the roasted ox on its spit outside, of cider, smoke and sweat. Faces gleamed in the lamplight, their plates piled high with meat. The giant platters of roast potatoes, parsnips and buttered cabbage were almost untouched. A man could eat cabbage from his garden any day, but only on this one night of the year could he eat all the meat he could scoff, then take a parcel of beef home to the wife and little'uns too, along with a head cheese maybe for the toothless old folk.

Mama sat at the head of the table, Old Barney at her left hand and Sidney, the head groom, at her right. Ben sat at the other end, where Father would have been if business didn't keep him in London most of the year.

When at last everyone had eaten their fill of meat, Mama nodded to the servants. The platters were replaced with apple pies, plum puddings, great wheels of cheese — for who'd want apple pie without a hunk of cheese? — jugs of clotted cream and custard. There were spoons for those who preferred them to Adam's cutlery, their fingers; and fresh jugs of cider lined the table.

Old Barney stood. 'And now, folks, it be time to lift your glasses to the mistress and to Master Ebenezer, to thank 'em for another Harvest Home!'

Ben flushed with pleasure. This was the first time he had been publicly thanked as well as Mama. He remained seated as the men all stood and drank their health.

More toasts came, and the pies and puddings shrank to crumbs. At last Old Barney rose again. It was time to sing.

*‘Twas in the spring when young Jed Brown
Thought he might walk to Lunnon Town
For there he might just find a mart
To buy himself a true sweetheart ...’*

Ben had heard the song a dozen times. Knew how Jed Brown would find a guinea, lose it to highwaymen, follow them to their lair, rescue the fair maiden held captive there, carry off the stolen gold and walk back home triumphant, never having been to ‘Lunnon Town’ at all. But he still enjoyed it. Loved the laughter, loved joining in at the chorus: *‘Derry down, derry down ...’*

The song finished to cheers and applause. Someone began ‘John Barleycorn’. Ben glanced out of the barn door. The moon was a sliver of cheese on the horizon. The men would sing for hours. No one would notice if he left now.

He slipped out the back door, grabbed the sack he’d left there and made for the big oak that stood at the edge of the park. Some said it had stood there since Sir Roderick’s time.

Ben peered up into the branches. Faces looked down at him. ‘Here, take this,’ he hissed, holding up the sack.

‘What you got?’

‘You’ll see.’

He waited till Tugger had hauled up the sack, then shinned up the giant trunk, gripping with his knees and elbows till he reached the first broad branch. Three boys sat there already, with others above them. Ben opened the sack and pulled out a huge sirloin of cold roast beef.

‘Cor, look at that,’ said Young Lon appreciatively. ‘Anyone got a knife?’

‘Me,’ said Lugs.

‘Chop it up, will you?’ asked Ben.

Tugger peered into the dimness of the sack. ‘What else you got in there?’

‘Two apple pies, half a cheese, a plum pudding, a roast chicken ... sorry, it’s squashed the pies a bit ... half a game pie, and this!’ Ben held up the flagon of cider in triumph.

‘How’d you get it all?’ demanded Tugger, his mouth already full of cold roast beef.

‘Waited till the servants were having dinner. Cookie made so much she won’t miss this.’

She probably would. But Cookie also snuck Ben gingerbread between meals and made him extra-large ham pies when he went egging with the other boys so he could share with them.

‘Three cheers for Ben,’ said Lugs softly. He took a gulp of cider and passed it on.

Ben broke off a hunk of apple pie, slightly chicken-flavoured, and passed the rest up to the boys on the branch above. The tree filled with the sounds of eating, while the moon floated lily-like in the vast pond of the sky.

We must do this every year, thought Ben. Even when I am an old man, I will make sure there is a feast for the boys in the oak tree.

Happiness filled him, as fizzy as the cider in the jug.

Ben slept late the next morning. He woke to find his clothes had been left warming for him by the fire. He dressed quickly, then ran downstairs to the morning room. Breakfast was still laid out on the sideboard, though Mama must have eaten hours ago. He helped himself to kidneys and bacon, kept hot in the silver chafing dishes.

‘Fresh toast, Master Ebenezer,’ said Filkinghorn, placing the toast rack before Ben. The butler had been at Badger’s Hill ever since Mama was a girl. ‘And tea,’ he added disapprovingly.

Ale had been served at breakfast until Mama had brought the tea-drinking habit back from school. That had been twenty years ago, but Filkinghorn still wasn’t used to it.

‘Thank you, Filkinghorn,’ said Ben, spreading marmalade thickly on his toast.

He looked up at a clatter in the yard. Filkinghorn vanished to open the front door. Ben wished he could follow, but only urchins peered around front doors. Voices ... Mama's and a stranger's, and Father's too! Why hadn't Father sent word to expect him?

Ben ran out to the hall just as Filkinghorn shut the library door. 'What's happening?' he demanded. 'Was that Father?'

The butler's expression was impossible to read. 'Yes, Master Ebenezer. The mistress said she'd send for you when they need you.'

'Thank you, Filkinghorn.'

What was happening? Why shouldn't he go in to greet his father straight away? Father only visited Badger's Hill for a few weeks in midsummer when London was full of diseases and smells. He should have been here weeks ago, but there had been no letter saying when he'd arrive. He always came with exotic gifts carried back by his ships: bright-coloured silks, fireworks from China that had astounded everybody, and once a parrot that really talked, though only in French, which Mama had said was a good thing because of the sailors' swearwords it shouted out.

Ben walked back to the morning room, finished his tea and toast after his kidneys and bacon, then nodded to Elsie to clear the sideboard. The hall clock chimed ten. It was time for his Latin lesson down at the rectory.

‘Master Ebenezer? The master wishes to see you in the library.’ Filkinghorn’s voice sounded ... odd.

‘Is ... is something the matter, Filkinghorn?’

The butler’s gaze seemed to drink in the ordered morning room, the polished table and sideboard, the blue silk curtains at the window. At last he said, ‘That is for the master to say, Master Ebenezer.’

Ben checked that his cuffs didn’t have marmalade on them, then crossed the room into the hallway. Filkinghorn opened the library door for him, and Ben stepped into the scent of old books, neatsfoot oil and lavender polish. His father stood by the window, stiff and silent. Mama sat on the sofa, her body rigid, as though all life had been squeezed from it. The stranger sat next to her, gazing at the books as if counting them. He looked around as Ben came in.

‘Father!’ Ben said.

Mr Huntsmore gave him a brief nod.

Ben had been about to run to him, but stopped as Mama said shakily, ‘Mr Nattisville, this is our son, Ebenezer. Ben, this is Mr Nattisville, the new ... owner ... of Badger’s Hill.’

The library seemed to fade, as if the summer sun had flickered. Ben stared at the man sitting next to Mama. He was stout, pale, a city man. No. This was impossible.

‘I ... I don’t understand,’ he said. ‘Badger’s Hill is ours. It’s always been ours.’

The stranger smiled at him, not unkindly. 'No longer, I'm afraid. Your father mortgaged the land to me two years ago to fund his shipping venture to China. The ships sank and the mortgage is due.'

'But Badger's Hill belongs to Mama.'

'A woman's property becomes her husband's on her marriage,' said Mama, her voice carefully emptied of emotion. She did not look at Father.

Badger's Hill isn't 'property', thought Ben. It's land and people. It's Lugs and Tugger and Old Barney and Filkinghorn. It's our life.

Mama stood, her face pale, her fingers clenched. She still didn't look at her husband, but her voice was steady as she said, 'Mr Nattisville, please let me show you the accounts. You will wish to see the property too, and be introduced to the household.'

'Thank you, Mrs Huntsmore,' said Mr Nattisville, rising and bowing politely. He followed her into the hall.

Ben ran after them. 'Mama —' he began.

Mama smiled that empty, polite smile at Mr Nattisville. 'If you will excuse us, I will change into something more suitable. Ben, if you would come with me.'

Ben waited till they had turned the corner of the staircase. 'Mama, it ... it can't be true.'

His mother kept climbing, step by step, as evenly as if she had been wound up, like a clock, and could not stop. 'It is,' she said briefly.

‘But Father couldn’t ... he wouldn’t ...’

‘Of course he would.’ For the first time anger seeped into her words. ‘He married me for my money. Once he had that and a son, he no longer needed me or Badger’s Hill. And now he has lost both the money and the land.’

Ben stared at her. Why had she never told him? He’d never guessed. ‘But what will we do?’ he asked her.

Mama stopped at that and held out her arms to him. ‘Ben ...’ He fell into her embrace, felt her warmth about him. ‘We have no choice,’ she whispered. ‘A wife belongs to her husband. A son belongs to his father. He can do what he wants with us.’

Ben longed to comfort her, to say, ‘When I grow up, I will win Badger’s Hill back for you.’ But how could he promise that? This was the only world he knew.

At last she pushed him gently away. ‘I need to persuade Mr Nattisville to do well by our people,’ she said quietly. ‘Go to your father. I don’t know what he intends for us now, but perhaps he will tell his son.’ She gave a bitter smile.

Ben returned to the library and opened the door quietly. The room’s scent seemed to have changed. Now it smelled of betrayal. His father still stood by the window, gazing at the gardens that were no longer theirs.

Ben had thought his father a brave man who rode the wave-lashed trade routes from England to Calcutta and

Shanghai. A man who loved his son, his wife, his land. But Ben realised he had made that man from his own imagination, like Cookie fashioned gingerbread men from dough.

‘How could you lose Badger’s Hill, sir?’ he demanded.

His father turned to look at him. ‘It’s land, son. No more, no less,’ he said flatly. ‘It hardly makes a profit.’

Ben stared at him. Profit? How could anyone reduce Badger’s Hill to mere money? Was this truly all his father had thought when he visited the place? And yet it seemed Badger’s Hill *was* just money, in the eyes of his father and of the law.

‘What about the servants?’ he asked. ‘The men? The tenant farmers?’

‘Nattisville will keep some of the servants, or whoever rents the place will. I doubt Nattisville wants to live so far from society. And if the men and tenants are hardworking, he’ll keep them on too.’

What of those who could no longer work, like old Mr Porter, or the widow Jeffries and her children? Ben wanted to strike this man who called himself his father; he wanted to defend his home and people.

He met his father’s eyes. ‘And us, sir — Mama and me? Do you expect us to go to London with you?’

He had only been to the capital once, with its choking fogs and foulness, its creeping filthy river and houses as far as you could see.

‘London? No, I’m through with London for a while. I’ve had a run of bad luck at the gaming tables. If I don’t make good on my promises,’ Mr Huntsmore shrugged, ‘there won’t be a club in London that will open its doors to me. But I’ve found a way to turn our fortunes around.’ He glanced at the door, as if to make sure no servants were lurking, then drew an envelope from his pocket. ‘Look!’ His voice grew eager. ‘Do you know what these are, son?’

‘No, sir,’ said Ben, holding his politeness like a shield. Like Mama had done, he thought.

‘They are letters of marque, signed by the Prince of Wales himself a week ago when we were playing cards.’ His father’s voice dropped low. ‘These letters give me permission to sail against any enemies of the Crown. That means the Frenchies, boy. I have one ship left, and even she is mortgaged, but one ship is all I need to rebuild our fortunes. Riches unlimited!’

‘How, sir?’ asked Ben, because his father seemed to want him to.

‘You know the Port Jackson colony?’

Ben nodded. A prison colony at the end of the world, on the east coast of New Holland, or New South Wales as some now called it, filled with criminals and poisonous snakes, and where nothing grew the way it should. The rector had lent him William Tench’s account of the colony’s terror of starvation a decade or two before.

‘And you know where it is near, son?’

Ben forced himself to answer. ‘It’s south of India and China, sir.’

‘Ha! Ships that ply the India and China trade routes are too well-armed to attack. We’ll have no truck with them. No, boy, Port Jackson is south of the richest port in all the world: Batavia. Used to be a Dutch port, but the French control Holland now Napoleon has put his brother on the throne there.’

‘So now the Dutch are our enemies too?’

‘Exactly. Napoleon would take England too if he could, just like he’s invaded half of Europe. But we will beat him — and as we do, men like me will make our fortunes. And you will be at my side.’

‘I don’t understand, sir.’ Ben’s lips felt numb, his mind as thick as treacle.

His father lowered his voice even further. ‘No more plodding among the country clods for my son. We’re going to capture a Dutch ship, lad. Not a warship like the Navy fights, but an enemy’s trading ship. Ships laden with gold that sail far south to catch the world’s fastest winds, then up the west coast of New Holland to Batavia to buy their pepper, nutmeg and cinnamon. Not one of them will suspect they might be attacked so far south.’ Mr Huntsmore’s face had fallen into what Ben suspected was his true expression: the bright face of a gambler dreaming of gold. ‘Capturing just one of those ships

will pay my debts a hundred times over, make us rich as nabobs. And these ...' He lifted the letters and kissed them. 'These give me, Branwell Huntsmore, the right to take any enemy ship, lock, stock, gold and spices.'

The clock seemed to stop ticking. Time stretched, so it felt like minutes before Ben managed to whisper, 'We'll be pirates?'

Pirates were thieves. Murderers.

His father grinned. 'Privateers, because we have the blessing of the Prince of Wales. We'll take a load of convicts out there and cargo too, to get some ready cash and so nobody suspects what we plan to do. We don't want others joining in our game. Once two or three Dutch ships have been taken, other captains will get wary and arm their ships. We want them just sitting there, ripe for the plucking. The *Golden Girl's* decks are being reinforced even as we speak, and Captain Danvers has set about hiring the right crew. There'll be cast-iron cannons and muskets down in the hold and barrels of gunpowder. Just one ship, son, to turn our fortunes right!'

Ben couldn't seem to move or speak. It was too much to take in. He had lost his home, his life. And this was what his father was offering to replace it.

'Well, son? Are you with me? Or have you been turned into a mouse by too much petticoat rule?'

Ben met his father's eyes. 'What if I say no, sir?'

Mr Huntsmore gazed at him. 'Lily-livered, eh?'

‘I am not lily-livered!’

‘This is for your sake too,’ his father said. ‘I’m offering you adventure! But if you are afraid to join me, you can stay with your mother in Sydney Town. I’ll rent a house there.’

‘Mama is coming too? But ... but it’s a dangerous voyage to Port Jackson, sir!’

Ben knew enough about shipping to understand that one in four ships sank — wrecked on rocks or icebergs, or lashed with giant waves in storms; or were blown off course, or lost in the doldrums when no wind blew to fill their sails so all on board starved or died of thirst.

‘Anything I leave here with your mother could be confiscated to pay my debts,’ Mr Huntsmore said. ‘She has to come. Well? Are you scared to leave your little badger’s burrow? Frightened to face the world?’

Ben met his father’s eyes again. ‘I’m not scared, sir.’ Mama’s words came back to him: *We have no choice*. And this at least was a way he might be able to buy back their home. ‘I’ll fight with you,’ he added quietly. ‘If that will get our fortune back.’

His father laughed and clapped Ben on the back. He stank of rum toddy, Ben realised. Even his skin smelled of it.

‘Losing this place may be the best thing that ever happened to you!’ he said. ‘Should have been sent to school long ago. But you mustn’t breathe a word, eh?’

Mr Huntsmore tapped his nose. 'Not even to your mother. Especially not to her. Women don't understand business. Or the difference between being a privateer and a pirate.'

Yes, my father is a pirate, Ben thought. He is looting his wife's life and his son's.

He lifted his chin. 'When we have made our fortune, I will buy Badger's Hill back.'

His father shrugged. 'I doubt you'll still want this old place when you've seen more of the world. No, we'll have something much grander, boy. A castle maybe. And a proper heiress for you to marry, not a Friday face from a backwater where there are scarce three families fit to dine with.'

Anger seethed, but Ben kept his voice calm, as Mama had done. 'I want Badger's Hill, sir.'

'Well, I expect Nattisville will be willing enough to sell to you when the time comes. There's no decent hunting here, and tuppence in the bank at the end of the year.' He rang the bell. 'Another rum toddy,' he ordered Filkinghorn when the butler opened the library door.

Mr Huntsmore waited till the old man had left, then smiled at Ben, his eyes gleaming. 'They think Branwell Huntsmore is finished in the city, but we'll show them, won't we, son? We'll come sailing back with a fortune.'

'Yes, sir,' said Ben, but inside he was thinking that he no longer had a home. He must leave his friends as well

as all the people he held dear. All he had now was a ship, a distant colony, and his father's dreams of riches and adventure — all dependent on the words he must not say.

Privateer. Pirate.