

EXCERPT

Maggie  
& the  
Pirate's Son



ROSE PRENDEVILLE



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# EXCERPT

*For everyone in need of an adventure  
and searching for a lodestar of your own.*



## Prologue



13 YEARS AGO, CALLANISH, ISLE OF LEWIS

**T**he ancient mud was just thick enough to hold Bastian's laundry peg sailors at attention like the standing stone they surrounded. They were naval marines, of course, the kind who sailed tall wooden ships far out to sea, beyond the beyond, leaving the MacLeods and the Macaulays alone, with Bastian bouncing back and forth between them.

The laundry peg navy had traveled inland to investigate the circle of stones, rowing little boats like the Lewis fishermen used to cast their nets. Now they stood in a line—one, two, three—on guard and awaiting orders. The captain, however, was engaged in a rather rude argument with his first mate over whether or not to retreat.

Stomach growling, Bastian looked up to find the sun beginning to dip behind the massive old stones. The captain had best hurry up and make a decision. Miss Macaulay would already be sore at him for pilfering more laundry pegs to fill out his regiment. If he was late for dinner too, even his dimples might not save him.

With another glance skyward, he scooped up the sailors and stuffed them in his pockets, slapped on his cap, and turned down the hill towards his village.

She was a good sort, Miss Macaulay. He didn't like to vex her. Of the five different homes he'd lived in since his mother's passing, Miss Macaulay baked the best shortbread and gave him the largest portions of fish pie. She said it was so he could grow up big and handsome like his da—the only warm description he'd ever heard of his sire, who was usually mentioned with grim-faced curses—and so in this case, Bastian didn't mind the comparison.

With his dark hair and golden-brown skin, he didn't stand out as much as Ma had, but he didn't match the fair and ginger children who speckled the island like white-fleeced lambs, and he quite liked the notion he might grow up to be thought handsome.

Memories of his ma tugged several different strings within his heart all at once, so Bastian hummed the song she'd taught him before he'd even learned how to read.

*The king once built a town so fair,  
Red hibiscus lined the square.  
Dance a waltz, then dance again.  
Down the hill, an empty lane.  
Andrew's spire calls out to thee.  
Hear the bells, but do not see.*

He scrunched his left eye, trying to remember the next part, and then started the nonsense rhyme over again.

As he neared home, he spied a ship way out in the harbor and peered through his fist like a spyglass, tempted to run along the beach until he could make out the colors of its standard. But cooking smells already assaulted him from every stone house along the lane, so he put exploration momentarily aside, determined to eat his fill before going out again.

When he lifted the latch and opened the door, the first thing

Bastian noticed was the fire still banked. No delicious stew simmered on the hob, no bannocks wafted their rich doughy scent to greet him. Miss Macaulay leaned against the cold stove with her arms across her chest while a tall man in an expensive dark waistcoat sat at the table in Bastian's own chair, drinking the medicinal whisky.

For a moment, Bastian stood in the doorway, staring at the adults who stared right back at him, very much wishing he'd taken the time to chase down that ship after all. He'd lived with Miss Macaulay for nearly a year, and in all that time, Bastian had never known male suitors to call on her.

His belly rumbled for a different reason this time. It knew without being told that his days of hearty, loving portions had come to an end.

"Come and say hello to your father, Sebastian," Miss Macaulay said in Gaelic, with a tremor in her voice instead of the warm, honeyed tone she used when she called him handsome.

"Tell me the boy can speak English," the man growled.

"Have you forgotten your Gaelic then, Neil?" she spat back in English, with a tone that sounded all wrong coming from her mouth.

Bastian slid his gaze over the stranger and weighed his options, trying not to linger on the man's hard, cold eyes. He was fast for nine and a half, but the man had long legs and lounged in his chair like a cat feigning laziness, flicking its tail, ready to spring the moment a mouse ventured out of the shadows.

If he ran, Bastian might stow away on that ship out there in the harbor, but if this man was indeed his wayward sire, then the ship most likely belonged to him. Bastian wanted to ignore the man and race into the protective arms of Miss Macaulay, but her arms were still closed, wrapped protectively around herself instead.

Steeling his courage, Bastian stepped to the man's side as he

was bidden, this figment of so many imaginings, who had always loomed larger than life, now made flesh before him.

The stranger assessed him for a moment and then said, “Well he’s certainly her child. I don’t know if he’s mine.”

“He has your nose and chin.”

The man shrugged. “Get your things,” he said, and took another sip of whisky.

*What things?* Bastian wondered. *Fishing things?*

“Cornelius, you can’t mean to take him with you,” Miss Macaulay pleaded.

The stranger slammed his cup down on the table, but his words were the hushed steel of a cutlass being drawn from its sheath. “You wrote you couldn’t keep feeding him.”

“But a ship is no place for a child.”

“What did you expect me to do? Send coin?”

His laugh was laced with anger, and Miss Macaulay’s face crumpled. “You could give up the sea. Come back here, make a life together. You promised me that once.”

The stranger snorted, and tears sprang to Miss Macaulay’s eyes, which she tried to hide by fussing about with a kettle on the cold stove.

“Go and get your things, Sebastian,” she said in a scratchy voice. “I’ll wrap some shortbread and bannocks for your journey.”

Any excitement was tempered by the squirmy feeling in his empty belly, but Bastian gathered his clean sark and breeches into a satchel, along with one clean handkerchief because it would please his gran. With a heavy heart, he emptied his pockets of the laundry peg sailors, keeping just one for himself. Miss Macaulay wouldn’t begrudge him the one, even if his dinner portions had been too large after all.

His mother’s wooden locket already hung from his neck, but he checked to make sure both their likenesses were still safe inside. She smiled out at him, and he smiled back, tucking her safely inside his sark.



Just before leaving, he snatched his granda's gold-and-black tartan from the bed and crammed it in so the satchel bulged. He might never grow into the plaid, but he couldn't leave it behind.

Eager to see the ship up close, Bastian followed the silent stranger out of the village and down to the port where awaited as large a two-masted vessel as he'd ever seen. The figurehead was an ugly, scowling youth, its outstretched arm clutching a writhing serpent as blood seemed to drip from the youth's bared teeth, and Bastian could swear its eyes followed him, even as he stepped aboard *Aulfarrand's Revenge*.



## Chapter One



1730, EVIE, ORKNEY

**I**t was a brigantine ship, with two tall masts and square-rigged sails, and the fact that Maggie knew so much about a pile of floating timber reaffirmed she'd lived in Orkney far too long. She watched anyway as it deftly maneuvered through Eynhallow Sound instead of docking in one of the large ports where such a ship belonged.

Perhaps the nearest port was already overrun by ships laden down with letters full of bad news like the two in Maggie's apron pocket. Her sister Ellen's note had been brief and kindly meant: an offer to move back to the mainland to live with her and Silas MacKenzie, the big Laird Kintail, at Castle Leod. Much as Maggie missed her quiet, gentle sister, she couldn't stomach the thought of residing there, playing widowed governess to the growing brood of MacKenzie children—beautiful, lively children who would fill Maggie's days instead of children of her own. She couldn't face such a vision of her future, and yet the other letter in her pocket was far worse. She could feel it even as she sat on an old stone wall, watching the ship navigate the sound. It burned

hot in her pocket, as though inked with fire, and heavy as though writ on stone.

Her father wrote that Maggie's one year and one day of mourning were coming to an end, and he'd already picked out a new husband for her: one of his former students, Michael MacFadyen. He and Michael would arrive in one week's time to collect her and take her back to Inverness, for, at twenty years of age, she was still young enough to try her hand at marriage again.

If she'd been a boy, there would be no trying again. There would only be marching herself down to the captain of that ship and signing on to his crew.

"Maybe this time he's picked someone better suited," her neighbor, Lorna, had replied last evening, when Maggie related the sorry news, and she'd almost laughed in the other woman's face.

"Anyone who knew my cousin Jory would have known she was the least-suited woman on earth for holy orders," she replied. "But that's what he chose for her when the choice was his. Nor would any have thought my sister a fit match for the son of a laird."

"The Lord works in mysterious ways," Lorna chided.

"Aye, Father got lucky with that one. Still, I reckon suitability's the last thing on his mind." If it had been, he would never have matched her with Jeremiah Budge the moment she came of age. Back then, Maggie had only been suited to fairytales and romantic novels, not to becoming the real-life helpmeet of a fully grown man.

The truth was, there'd been no dowry left for Maggie's keeping. Her father had given it all to Silas MacKenzie when he wed Wee Ellen, and while Maggie had felt certain her brother-in-law would have settled a dowry on her himself two years ago, her father had refused to even hear of it. He'd made up his mind she would wed his former student and wouldn't be swayed on the matter.

Jeremiah Budge had owed a debt of unpaid tutoring fees, and

so Mr. Mackintosh had written off the debt as the amount of his younger daughter's dowry, claiming he got the better end of the bargain, for wasn't Maggie finally off his hands?

This new man, Michael MacFadyen, was another former student, one who used to ogle Maggie as if he could see right through her stays before she'd even turned eighteen.

Maggie shuddered. She couldn't marry him. She refused.

As a girl, she had always imagined marriage to be some magical adventure filled with laughter and cozy picnics, whispered secrets and bubbling joy. She'd been sorely disappointed the first time. There wouldn't be a second.

"Jeremiah brought you here, that's a bit like an adventure," Lorna had suggested in a pathetic sort of way. Even she knew it was ridiculous.

Maggie didn't laugh in her face because she'd learned some amount of tact in the two years since her wedding, but Orkney had been less of an adventure than a prison sentence—her husband's sudden death a blessed reprieve.

Still, Lorna must have read the incredulity on her face because she refilled Maggie's cup with strong, hot tea and said, "Go on, then. What sort of adventure would you want if you could have one?"

Staring out towards the sound and the smattering of islands across the water, Maggie tried to recall the girl she used to be. "I always thought... all I ever wanted was to wed a devilishly handsome young man and mother a passel of mischievous, deliriously happy children. But"—she went on quickly, cutting Lorna off before she could suggest Michael MacFadyen might have grown handsome in the years since Maggie had met him—"now, I suppose all I want is to be someplace warm. I've never once felt truly warm here. Even sitting before the fire there's a chill nipping at your back like the creeping fingers of a shadow."

Lorna frowned but didn't defend her home, and Maggie was a little sorry for being quite so blunt.

“And perhaps to swing through the trees like a monkey,” she added to make the other woman laugh.

“A monkey!”

“Jory was forever climbing trees when I was small, and I was desperate to join her. Now I suppose I’ve missed my chance.”

Lorna’s face said she couldn’t fathom such a thing.

“She looked so free. But even when I was little, I was afraid—”

“You? Afraid?” *This* was the notion that finally caused Lorna to laugh. How little they knew each other.

“Not of the tongue lashing I’d receive for mussing my pinafore. I was afraid the lads wouldn’t like me if I were as wild as I wanted to be, and oh, but I was desperate for the lads to like me.”

“And now?” Lorna asked, amused.

Maggie fingered her short hair. It had grown back almost curly after she’d shorn it when her husband died, a final act of rebellion against his accursed soul. “Now I don’t care what the lads think at all, but there aren’t any trees to climb,” she laughed helplessly.

Lorna’s face was open and easy to read. She had always found Maggie a bit silly, and though politeness demanded she try to hide it, some things weren’t easily hidden. She’d grown up on Orkney and married a local fisherman she’d known all her life, the same fate as most of the island’s young women. He spoke little more than grunts in Maggie’s presence, and she wondered how well even Lorna knew him. She cooked his food and mended his clothes, bore his children, and offered no complaints. She took life as it came without any thought to whether or not she particularly enjoyed it. Perhaps she was even fond of her fisherman in the way that familiarity can breed affinity as well as contempt. They seemed companionable at least, both of them too tired or even-tempered to fight.

But Maggie had seen the fire crackling between Finn and Jory, even from across a crowded room. She’d witnessed her sister bloom under the sunshine of Silas MacKenzie’s worship.

Now, after one year of marriage and one year in mourning dress, she couldn't help thinking she'd imagined it all. Such love was all right for fairytales, but if it could be found in real life, well, then perhaps *she* was the problem. Maggie wasn't a heroine for fairy stories. She was as stubborn as the sun that refused to set in summer, too wild and self-centered to take care of a husband or children the way they would need.

That night, she lay in bed staring up at the discolored spot where the roof used to leak. After Jeremiah's funeral, the village men had turned out in force to repair the thatch so she could almost pretend her husband had never been there at all, as though they hadn't fought, and she hadn't thrown the bucket full of rain-water at his head, as though he hadn't climbed up on the roof in the middle of a lightning storm just to prove a point.

The lightning strike had accompanied the loudest crack of thunder Maggie'd ever heard. They said the roof would've caught fire if Jeremiah hadn't been struck instead.

Shivering, she burrowed deeper beneath her quilts. She'd meant it when she told Lorna she longed for warmth. How sad that all her youthful dreams had been reduced to something so basic and primal. At least if her father dragged her back to Inverness, she could enjoy a bit of summer weather before MacFadyen dragged her off to whatever place he had in mind. God help her, if he put her on a ship to America, she would throw herself into the sea. Not because of any particular objection to the New World, but because the choice wasn't hers.

When it came down to it, she supposed she was an ungrateful brat. There was really no getting around it. She despised this low stone house at the end of the earth, miles and miles from everything she'd ever known, loathed the uncle who died leaving the place to Jeremiah, and perhaps hated her father most of all for deciding they must wed. Michael MacFadyen might surprise her by being the kindest man she'd ever met, but she didn't want him, and so she hated him, too.

Disappointed by her father's selection of Jeremiah Budge, Maggie had initially underestimated the former pupil. Lanky and scholarly, she'd thought Jeremiah was a timid sort. He was still a bachelor at thirty-six, and she'd naively expected him to be putty in her young hands. Instead, he was constantly annoyed by her inexperience and found her lacking in every way.

For starters, Maggie's stitching wasn't prettily done. Her cooking, when she didn't burn the soup, was far from savory, her housekeeping abysmal, and her thighs never spread wide enough or often enough for his liking. The only thing he seemed to approve of was her hair.

Pushing herself up in bed, she snatched up her sewing shears and trimmed it even shorter, the tiny chestnut curls dropping to the floor like autumn leaves in a place which had no trees. See if her father's new stud pony would take her now!

From her perch atop the tumbledown broch wall that afternoon, she'd watched sailors spill off their brigantine like sun-browned ants marching about their busy lives. They must be merchant mariners sailing back and forth from somewhere quite warm to be so tan. Mercy, how she envied them—such freedom, such endless adventures. She couldn't begin to fathom the things they must have seen, because she'd read all the wrong kinds of books.

Even now, they were probably swapping stories in the tavern over pints of ale and bowls of mutton stew, laughing and singing, strangers to the notion of setting down roots anywhere as windswept as this.

Hugging her knees to her chest, it struck Maggie again that if she were a boy she could run away and join them.

She laughed grimly.

If she were a boy, she wouldn't be in this situation to begin with. She wouldn't need to run away and join them, because her father wouldn't be so desperate to be rid of a son. No, he'd find a



son very useful indeed, likely apprenticing her out and demanding she hand over all her wages.

If she were a boy, she might have run away to sea long ago just to find a taste of freedom from her father.

Freedom.

She shrugged back down under the blankets, but the thought wouldn't let her go so easily.

*Freedom.*

She tossed and turned like she was caught in a whirlpool eddy.

It would be an easy thing, she supposed, to creep on board and hide amongst the cargo. By the time they found her it would be far too late to shoo her on her way. They might not be happy about it, but they'd have to keep her then, at least until the next port. She had a little money which might be used to buy passage if they were truly fussed.

Maggie had never been one to pray overmuch. She had long since given it up altogether, but when she'd read her father's letter yesterday, she'd certainly muttered an oath begging for deliverance. It could almost have been construed as prayer-like.

What was the brigantine, then, but an answer to her almost-prayer, appearing from the fog like some kind of beacon? There was no good reason for the ship to drop anchor in the sound instead of the harbor.

Jory had run away from a future she didn't consent to, forging the one she preferred instead. Maggie could run, but on an island, she'd eventually be spinning in circles.

That ship out there was her chance to escape, to choose whatever path she wanted. She'd be a fool to sit back and let it sail away.

Climbing out of bed before she could talk herself out of the decision, Maggie dressed quickly, throwing on her warm Mackintosh earasaid and drawing it up over her chilly head. What else did a lady pack when running away to sea? She filled one pocket with dried beef and another with dried strawberries

and hazelnuts. She collected her sewing kit and a spare chemise and tucked away the folding frame containing likenesses of Ellen and Jory, drawn by the big MacKenzie's younger cousin, Bram.

A tiny pang of regret bit Maggie for making such a fuss when her father had teased the match. Bram would be about fifteen these days, and she could be idly biding her time in Inverness waiting for him to grow up instead of widowed and facing another inconvenient match with a stranger. But none of that mattered now. Adventure was calling.

After writing a hasty note to Lorna and another to her parents, Maggie crept down to the shore before she could change her mind. The deserted beach called to her like a selkie of old, as the brigantine rocked gently against its moorings.

She glanced around to make sure no one was watching and was startled to find a cream-colored cat with glowing yellow eyes staring back at her from a wooden plank abutting the vessel. Flicking its tail saucily, the cat turned and scampered up the plank and over the side as though welcoming her aboard. She followed on tiptoe, freezing each time a timber creaked.

The cat, which she immediately named Custard, led her across the shadowed deck and down a ladder into the gaping maw below.

Descending a ladder in her skirts and earasaid was quite the challenge, she soon discovered. Twice she nearly slipped. How on earth had the cat managed it without raising a ruckus?

Once her feet finally touched solid boards again, she sagged against the bulkhead in relief. Custard just blinked its golden eyes and turned down a corridor.

Was it called a corridor on a ship? She wasn't sure.

Not eager to be discovered until they were well out to sea, she hurried in the direction the cat had fled before being swallowed by the cavernous abyss. Candle lanterns at the entrance did little to light her way. To call it dark would be like describing the Orkney wind as chilly or Jeremiah Budge as cruel: factually

accurate but far understating the situation. She couldn't make out her own hand in front of her face.

Feeling each step almost one toe at a time, she crept forward, following the rumble of Custard's purr as she shuffled with one hand on the wall for guidance until it gave way to a wider area, just as dark and almost more cramped, packed with crates and barrels of all sorts. A stack of them loomed up out of the darkness and she froze, certain one strong exhale would send them all crashing down.

The cat led her through a maze-like area where her outstretched fingers tangled in netting that hung from the low ceiling—hammocks for the crew, she realized, making them out in the glimmer of twilight from the portholes and scurrying past as quickly as she could. When she stubbed her toe on what felt like heavy iron, she bit her lip hard, and swallowed the cries.

As though Custard sensed her pain, the cat rubbed against her legs, making a figure-eight between them before heading off again, blinking at her over one shoulder like it knew its eyes were just about the only thing she could see. Then it turned a corner and she followed once more, down, down down, coming to a stop when she finally did bump into a stack of crates, causing a chorus of squawks and clucking.

Borrowing some straw from the sleepy chickens, which warbled softly in irritation, she made herself a little nest in the furthest corner she could find, piled high with more crates to shield her from view. She had never heard of feline messengers from the heavens, but perhaps the cat was some spirit's familiar, sent to guide her journey. She would never have found such a clever little hiding place on her own, and Custard almost seemed smug the way it curled up on her lap, as though she were precisely where it wanted her to be.

Had she done the right thing? Her knees and shins ached from the many obstacles she'd tripped over, but bruises would mend. They were a small price for warmth, and most of all,

adventure. How funny it would be when she presented herself to the captain. Like her father, he would lament the need for someone to take her off his hands. Then she'd offer him her money, and he'd shake his head in annoyed amusement and warn her to stay out from underfoot.

Heart still pounding after skulking through the darkness, Maggie was now so excited that even the gentle rocking of the ship and the warm, purring cat couldn't lull her to sleep for quite some time.



BASH WOKE WITH A START AND STRAINED HIS EARS AGAINST THE night, but all he could hear was the familiar creak of timber and flap of sails, the gentle thump of the surf against the hull, and the snores of the crew who had finally stumbled back from their shore leave. His heartbeat slowed as he adjusted himself in his swaying hammock and pulled the old black-and-gold MacLeod plaid up from where it had slipped to the floor. Summers were blasted cold in the islands, and Orkney was almost far enough north to kiss the pole.

He kept listening, for what he couldn't say. Something was off besides the chill. The entire journey to Scotland had been ill-advised, not only because they couldn't afford it. His stomach grumbled, reminding him that the cod he'd caught and fried for his dinner hadn't been enough to fill his belly. Fish never did for long. Had the others fared any better in the village tavern, with barely enough coin for a pint of ale between them, let alone provisions to see them back across the Atlantic?

Probably. If this place was anything like the village of his youth, they likely turned the taps for free just to keep rowdy sailors peaceful. Might feed them, too, crusty bannocks and bowls

of hearty stew. His mouth watered, but Bash didn't really mind fending for himself. It was just about the only peace he got—when the crew went ashore, waving and blowing him kisses as he stayed behind, captain's orders. He couldn't even remember what land felt like under his boots.

With the sort of certainty that he only ever felt in the marrow of his bones, Bash knew the captain had dropped anchor here for his personal torment. Orkney was so close he could taste home, but not so close it mattered. It mollified him somewhat, realizing the mad old man needed him and was just a little scared Bash might leave, scared enough he hadn't sailed directly to Lewis. He wasn't so confident his orders that Bash never leave the ship would be obeyed.

What would Bash have done if they had gone to Lewis instead? After thirteen years away, there was nothing on the island for him now.

There was nothing in Scotland for any of them, except rumors that Willy Walsh had packed it in and taken his sloop back home, a pirate's life no more.

Bash rolled his eyes and put an arm behind his head. Fucking nonsense. If Willy Walsh were going to give up the life, he'd have done it twelve years earlier when the King offered a pardon. Indeed, rumors suggested he'd done just that, and if the old pirate had the captain's lost treasure, Bash would eat the main sail. He was hungry enough.

Before they left Nassau, Bash had plotted a course up the eastern coast of the colonies to harass the English merchants and navy alike, from Florida on up to Boston, where supposedly rampant lawlessness and stirrings of rebellion made easy pickings for pirates. But Mad wouldn't hear of it, and the captain always knew best.

The crew had a year or two left at most before they'd be caught by the navy and hanged, or even just starve to death. Despite not having set foot on land in ten years, Bash still hadn't

saved enough coin to strike out on his own. Raiding fishermen around the Caribbean didn't bring a heavy purse, and they hadn't encountered so much as a schooner during the Atlantic crossing. With the ever-present threat of pirate-hungry vessels patrolling the British coast, Bash reckoned the *Revenge* would be lucky to make it back to warmer waters in one piece.

Captain Mad MacLeod was truly earning his nickname with this ridiculous voyage, and everyone knew it. But they followed orders because none of them had any better ideas. Election or no, the captain wouldn't step aside without a mutiny, and mutiny wouldn't put coin in their pockets or food in their bellies. So they all just pretended to believe there was gold at the end of the rainbow. And maybe there was, but the rainbow didn't end in Willy Walsh's cargo hold.

If there had ever been as much loot as Mad let on, which Bash doubted, and the captain had really buried more than he'd spent, which Bash also couldn't believe, then Mad had forgotten where he left it, plain and simple. It was a twenty-two-year-old mystery no one would ever solve.

Whether he'd accepted it or not, Mad knew the gold was lost, but he was canny enough to see his crew growing thin and fractious. They were trapped in a life which was no longer prosperous, and even Bash couldn't chart a course out of it.

Coming to Scotland had been a charade to boost morale, nothing more. Tomorrow, Mad would declare new rumors of Walsh's whereabouts, and he'd instruct Bash to sail them straight back across the ocean to where they'd begun.

With any luck, they'd dodge the navy and even take a merchant ship or two. The pay would either be enough for Bash to slip off and start some new life, or so little the crew would finally mutiny and toss Mad overboard like so much rubbish. Bash wasn't fussy which.

He held his breath at the sound of light footsteps padding

towards him, like someone trying to sneak, and reached for his dagger.

“Mrow?” a cat murmured, springing up to sit on his chest.

Letting out his breath, he held up a hand for the cat to sniff, and then its bristly whiskers brushed against him in greeting, and he scratched behind its ears. It must have snuck aboard, lured by the smell of cooking cod perhaps.

“Go on now, Mouser,” he whispered. “If you set sail with us, like as not you’ll wind up eaten before we reach t’other side.”

The cat’s purring stopped, and it jumped down and padded away as if affronted at the very notion of hungry men eating cat and mushroom stew.

If only changing course were so easy for Bash. He’d spent more than half his life on this bloody ship. Pirating was the only life he knew. Even if he managed to take his leave with coin in his pocket, what was he going to do? Join the navy? Hire himself onto a merchant fleet? One whiff of his past, and he’d be food for the fishes. And that would be after he was hanged.

No, to reinvent himself he’d need a lot more than the pittance they could earn these days. He would need gold on par with the rumored stash the captain had misplaced all those years ago. And that was why he stayed—why they all stayed, even as they knew this way of life was ending—had ended long ago.

Mad Cornelius MacLeod clung to the illusion that piracy was still viable, and they clung to Mad. Any port was better than none when a storm was brewing.

Bash squirmed in his hammock, unable to shake the pall hanging over the night.

Maybe it was just being back in the islands making his nerves so jangled. It had been at least a year since they’d encountered the naval captain with a vendetta against Mad, long enough for a false sense of security to settle like a blanket. If Bash were paranoid like his captain, he’d say they were overdue for a visit from HMS *Pursuit*.

He tried not to be paranoid, as a general rule. Indeed, he tried very hard not to be anything like his sire at all, but he'd feared the specter of the Royal Navy's Captain Constantin and his *Pursuit* for more years than he hadn't. It was second nature to shudder at the thought of Mad MacLeod's old nemesis.

*Snap out of it*, he told himself. He'd feel better once he was back under equatorial stars. The cat had been a good omen. Still, it wouldn't hurt to check everything was in order. Tomorrow they must depart, for the day after was Friday, an unlucky day to set sail no matter the weather. It had to be tomorrow.

He rolled out of his hammock and shuffled towards the aft ladder, pausing to strain his ears towards the stern of the vessel where nocturnal creatures scurried, no doubt carefully stalked by his industrious feline companion.

Bash curled his lip. He'd always hated rats, and by the sound of it, they'd taken on some very large ones. At least there'd be extra protein when the chicken ran out.

He climbed the ladder and stepped out onto the deck, looking up into a cold, twilight sky. Even the moon shone differently here, or was his imagination overdoing it again?

*Dogwood blossoms, moonlight glow...*

A line from some faraway song floated into his head like a butterfly that refused to land. Maybe Mad was smarter than he realized—something about being back here was making Bash maudlin and edgy.

A familiar shadow stepped up to his elbow.

"So few stars," Dutch murmured.

"Aye." It should have felt familiar, but it was only disconcerting after more years spent sailing the equator than playing in the Lewis dirt. "What are we doing here, Dutch?"

The old quartermaster shook his head. "Following orders, son."

Bash smiled. Dutch called everyone son except the captain, and one word had never carried more meaning. Disappointment,



ridicule, condescension—all had their place, but most of the time Bash heard pride. Shared history. Even love. Whichever side Dutch came out on in the end, that was where Bash wanted to be, preferably not side by side wearing matching rope necklaces dancing for a crowd at Gallows Point.

“Don’t suppose Willy Walsh turned up in the tavern?”

“Just missed him,” Dutch replied.

Bash snorted. “Rotten luck.”

“We head after him at dawn.”

“What’ll we do if we catch him?” Bash asked, not quite teasing. It was bound to happen eventually, if the pirate really hadn’t hung up his rapier and made peace with the King, and unless his ship, the *Woebegone Whale*, was sitting heavy with gold, the crew really would mutiny at last.

Dutch turned to him, the whites of his eyes bright with anticipation. “Pray we never do.”

“Might not be the worst thing,” Bash murmured. “But what’s Mad’s plan? He should be searching for gold, not chasing a figment he knows doesn’t have it.” It was his own sort of madness, trying to second-guess the captain’s strategy, but Bash couldn’t help wondering aloud.

“He’s spent a dozen years searching,” Dutch said with a shrug.

“Still, he must know what’ll happen if we catch the *Whale* and there’s no gold. D’you suppose he wants it? Death by mutiny? Just to make a tidy end of things?”

It would be insanity, no doubt, to try and force a revolt, but it made some kind of twisted logic. The captain had refused the royal pardon. He would never surrender his ship, not until it was pried from his cold, dead grasp.

“But then why not just let the blue devil catch him?” Bash whispered, wondering, not for the first time, how they’d been so lucky, always slipping past the navy at the last moment as though fate or Providence were on their side.

The quartermaster shook his head. He had no answers. The captain kept his own counsel.

They stared in silence at the heavens a bit longer, until Dutch finally turned to go below deck, patting Bash's shoulder as he went. "Keep your wits about you, son. Weather's coming, and it always gets worse before it gets better."

He'd been saying the same thing for more than a decade, and after so much time, Bash was overdue some fair weather of his own.