Chapter One

1719 (or thereabouts)

I cut off a man's nose once.

I don't recall exactly when it was: 1719 or thereabouts. Nor where. But it happened during a raid on a Spanish brig. We wanted her supplies, of course. I pride myself on keeping the Jackdaw well stocked. But there was something else on board too. Something we didn't have but needed. Someone, to be precise. A ship's cook.

Our own ship's cook and his mate were both dead. The cook's mate had been caught pissing in the ballast, which I didn't allow and so punished him the traditional way, by making him drink a mug of the crew's piss. I must admit, I've never had it happen before where the mug of punishment piss actually killed the man, but that's what happened with the cook's mate. He drank the mug of piss, went to sleep that night and never got up. Cook was all right by himself for a time, but he did like a nip of rum, and after a nip of rum was apt to take the night air on the poop-deck. I'd hear him clomping about on the roof of my cabin, dancing a jig. Until one night I heard him clomping about on the roof of my cabin and dancing a jig—followed by a scream and a splash.

The bell rang and the crew rushed to the deck, where we dropped anchor and lit lanterns and torches, but of Cook there was no sign.

They had lads working with them, of course, but they were just boys, none of them knew how to do anything more culinary-minded than stir the pot or peel some spuds, and we'd been living on raw grub ever since. Not a man among us knew how to do so much as boil a pot of water.

Now, not long back we'd taken a man-o'-war. A tasty little excursion from which we'd bagged ourselves a brand-spanking-new broadside battery and a holdful of artillery: cutlasses, pikes, muskets, pistols, powder and shot. From one of the captured crew, who then became one of my crew, I'd learnt that the Dons had a particular supply ship on which served an especially adept cook. Word was that he'd cooked at court but offended the queen and been banished. I didn't believe a word of that but it didn't stop me repeating it, telling the crew we'd have him preparing our meals before the week was out. Sure enough we made it our business to hunt down this particular brig, and when we found it, lost no time in attacking it.

Our new broadside battery came in handy. We drew up alongside and peppered the brig with shot till she broke, the canvas in tatters and the helm splintered in the water.

She was already listing as my crew lashed and boarded her, scuttling over her sides like rats, the air heavy with the stink of powder, the sound of muskets popping and cutlasses already beginning to rattle. I was in among them as always, cutlass in one hand and my hidden blade engaged, the cutlass for melee work, the blades for close finishing. Two of them came at me and I made short of the first, driving my cutlass into the top of his head and slicing his tricorn in half as the blade cleaved his head almost in two. He went to his knees with the blade of my sword between his eyes but the problem was I'd driven it too deep, and when I tried to wrench it free his writhing body came with it. Then the second man was upon me, terror in his eyes, not used to fighting, obviously, and with a flick of the blade I sliced off his nose, which had the desired effect of sending him back with blood spraying from the bloody hole where his beak had been, while I used two hands to finally wrench my cutlass out of the skull of the first attacker and continue the good fight. It was soon over, with as few of their crew dead as possible, me having given out special instructions that on no account was the cook to be harmed—Whatever happens, I'd said, we have to take the cook alive.

As their brig disappeared beneath the water and we sailed away, leaving a fog of powder-smoke and a sea of splintered hull and bobbing bits of broken ship behind us, we gathered their crew on the main

deck to flush out the cook, hardly a man among us not salivating, his belly not rumbling, the well-fed look of their crew not lost on us. Not at all.

It was Caroline who taught me how to appreciate good food. Caroline my one true love. In the all-too-brief time we'd spent together she refined my palate, and I liked to think that she'd have approved of my policy towards the repast, and how I'd passed on a love of the finer things to the crew, knowing as I did, partly due to what she'd shown me, that a well-fed man is a happy man, and a happy man is a man less prone to questioning the authority of the ship, which is why in all those years at sea I never had one sniff of mutiny. Not one.

"Here I am," he said, stepping forward. Except it sounded more like, "Beer I bam," owing to his bandaged face, where some fool had cut off his nose.

Chapter Two

1711

But anyway, where was I? Caroline. You wanted to know how I met her.

Well, therein lies a tale, as they say. Therein lies a tale. For that I need to go much further back, to a time when I was just a simple sheep-farmer, before I knew anything of Assassins or Templars, of Blackbeard, Benjamin Hornigold, of Nassau or The Observatory, and might never have been any the wiser but for a chance meeting at the Auld Shillelagh one hot summer's day back in 1711.

The thing is, I was one of those young firebrands who liked a drink even though it got me into a few scrapes. Quite a few . . . incidents, shall we say, of which I'm none too proud. But that's the cross you have to bear if you're a little over-fond of the booze; it's rare to find a drinker with a clean conscience. Most of us will have considered knocking it on the head at one time or another, reforming our lives and perhaps turning to God or trying to make something out of ourselves. But then noon comes around and you know what's good for that head is another drink, and so you head for the tavern.

The taverns I'm referring to were in Bristol, on the south-west coast of dear old England, where we were accustomed to fierce winters and glorious summers, and that year, that particular year, the year that I first met her, 1711, like I say, I was just seventeen years old.

And, yes—yes, I was drunk when it happened. In those days, you'd have to say I was drunk a lot of the time. Perhaps . . . well, let's not exaggerate, I don't want to give a bad account of myself. But perhaps half of the time. Maybe a bit more.

Home was on the outskirts of a village called Hatherton, seven miles outside Bristol, where we ran a small holding keeping sheep. Father's interests lay with the livestock. They always had, so having me on board had freed him from the aspect of the business he most despised, which was making the trips into town with the merchandise, haggling with merchants and traders, bargaining, cutting deals. As soon as I'd come of age, by which I mean, as soon as I was enough of a man to meet the eye of our business associates and trade as an equal, well, that's what I did. Father was all too glad to let me do it.

My father's name was Bernard. My mother, Linette. They hailed from Swansea but had found their way to the West Country when I was ten years old. We still had the Welsh accent. I don't suppose I minded much that it marked us out as different. I was a sheep- farmer, not one of the sheep.

Father and Mother used to say I had the gift of the gab, and Mother in particular used to tell me I was a good-looking young man, and that I could charm the birds off the trees, and it's true, even though I do say so myself, I did have a certain way with the ladies. Let's put it this way: dealing with the wives of the merchants was a more successful hunting-ground than having to barter with their husbands.

How I spent my days would depend on the season. January to May, that was lambing season, our busiest time, when I'd find myself in the barns by sun-up, sore head or not, needing to see whether any ewes had lambed during the night. If they had, then they were taken into one of the smaller barns and put into pens, lambing jugs we called them, where Father would take over, while I was cleaning feeders, filling them up again, changing the hay and water, and Mother would be assiduously recording details of the new births in a journal. Me, I didn't have my letters then. I do now, of course; Caroline taught me them, along with much else that made me a man, but not back then, so that duty fell to Mother, whose own letters weren't much better but enough to at least keep a record.

They loved working together, Mother and Father. Even more reason why Father liked me going into town. He and my mother—it was as though they were joined at the hip. I had never seen another two people so much in love and with so little need to make a display of the fact. It was plain to witness that they kept each other going. It was good for the soul to see.

In the autumn we'd bring the rams through to the pasture to graze with the ewes, so that they could go on with the business of producing more lambs for the following spring. Fields needed tending to, fences and walls building and repairing.

In winter, if the weather was very bad, we brought the sheep into the barns, kept them safe and warm, ready for January, when lambing season began.

But it was during summer when I really came into my own. Shearing season. Mother and Father carried out the bulk of it while I made more frequent trips into town, not with carcasses for meat but with my cart laden with wool. In the summer, with even more opportunity to do so, I found myself frequenting the local taverns more and more. You could say I became a familiar sight in the taverns, in fact, in my long, buttoned-up waistcoat, knee-breeches, white stockings and the slightly battered brown tricorn that I liked to think of as being my trade-mark, because my mother said it went well with my hair (which was permanently in need of a cut but quite a striking sandy colour, if I do say so myself).

It was in the taverns I discovered that my gift of the gab was improved after a few ales at noon. The booze, it has that effect, doesn't it? Loosens tongues, inhibitions, morals. . . . Not that I was exactly shy and retiring when I was sober, but the ale, it gave me that extra edge. Or at least that's what I told myself at the time. After all, the money from extra sales made as a result of my ale-inspired salesmanship more than covered the cost of the ale in the first place. Or at least that's what I told myself at the time.

There was something else, too, apart from the foolish notion that Edward in his cups was a better salesman than Edward sober, and that was my state of mind.

Because the truth was, I thought I was different. No, I knew I was different. There were times I'd sit by myself at night and know I was seeing the world in a way that was all my own. I know what it is now but I couldn't put it into words back then other than to say I felt different.

Either because of that or despite it, I'd decided I didn't want to be a sheep-farmer all my life. I knew it the first day, when I set foot on the farm as an employee, and not as a child, and I saw myself, then looked at my father, and understood that I was no longer here to play and would soon go home to dream about a future setting sail on the high seas. No, this was my future, and I would spend the rest of my life as sheep-farmer, working for my father, marrying a local girl, siring boys and teaching them to become sheep-farmers, just like their father, just like their grandfather. I saw the rest of my life laid out for me, like neat work-clothes on a bed, and rather than feel a warm surge of contentment and happiness about that fact, it terrified me.

So the truth was, and there's no way of putting it more gently, and I'm sorry, Father, God rest your soul, but I hated my job. And after a few ales, well, I hated it less, is all I can say. Was I blotting out

my dashed dreams with the booze? Probably. I never really thought about it at the time. All I knew was that sitting on my shoulder, perched there like a mangy cat, was a festering resentment at the way my life was turning out—or, worse, actually had turned out.

Perhaps I was a little indiscreet concerning some of my true feelings. I might on occasion have given my fellow drinkers the impression that I felt life had better things in store for me. What can I say? I was young and arrogant and a sot. A lethal combination at the best of times, and these were definitely not the best of times.

"You think you're above the likes of us, do you?"

I heard that a lot. Or variations of it, at least.

Perhaps it would have been more diplomatic of me to answer in the negative, but I didn't, and so I found myself in more than my fair share of fights. Perhaps it was to prove that I was better than them in all things, fighting included. Perhaps because in my own way I was upholding the family name. A drinker I might have been. A seducer. Arrogant. Unreliable. But not a coward. Oh no. Never one to shrink from a fight.

It was during the summertime when my recklessness reached its heights; when I would be most drunk and most boisterous, and mainly a bit of a pain in the arse. But on the other hand, all the more likely to help a young lady in distress.

Chapter One

1719 (or thereabouts)

I cut off a man's nose once.

I don't recall exactly when it was: 1719 or thereabouts. Nor where. But it happened during a raid on a Spanish brig. We wanted her supplies, of course. I pride myself on keeping the Jackdaw well stocked. But there was something else on board too. Something we didn't have but needed. Someone, to be precise. A ship's cook.

Our own ship's cook and his mate were both dead. The cook's mate had been caught pissing in the ballast, which I didn't allow and so punished him the traditional way, by making him drink a mug of the crew's piss. I must admit, I've never had it happen before where the mug of punishment piss actually killed the man, but that's what happened with the cook's mate. He drank the mug of piss, went to sleep that night and never got up. Cook was all right by himself for a time, but he did like a nip of rum, and after a nip of rum was apt to take the night air on the poop-deck. I'd hear him clomping about on the roof of my cabin, dancing a jig. Until one night I heard him clomping about on the roof of my cabin and dancing a jig—followed by a scream and a splash.

The bell rang and the crew rushed to the deck, where we dropped anchor and lit lanterns and torches, but of Cook there was no sign.

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