

# Chapter One

## Bald and Bold

### **Ireland, 1593**

My ma was the greatest pirate that ever lived. My ma was the terror of the Irish Sea. My ma made strong men turn to water.

My ma was Grace O'Malley.

How do I know she was the greatest terror that ever turned water into pirates... I mean the greatest pirate that ever turned the Irish Sea into water... I mean... oh, you know what I mean.

How do I know she was great? Because she told me. She told me every day she was back home.

"Catherine," she said. "Catherine, your ma is the greatest pirate that ever lived."

"Are you really, Ma?" I asked and looked up at her fine figure with her cropped, red hair. Her hair was so short they called her Granuaile in the old Irish language. If you're not Irish, that means 'bald'. (If you *are* Irish, it still means 'bald'.)



Most girls are proud of their mothers and think they're as pretty as a shamrock in bloom. Now, even when I was too young to walk, I knew my ma wasn't a beauty. Her face was blotched by the salty west winds and scarred with fifty fights. Her nose was broken and one eye was half blind.

But I was still proud of my ma, Grace O'Malley. Of course I wanted to be just like her. I wanted to bring back riches to our castle in Connacht. If you're not Irish, then you need to know that Connacht is the grandest county in Ireland. (If you *are* Irish, it's still a grand county on the west coast of Ireland... and I don't care how grand you think *your* county might be, I'll fight anyone who says Connacht's not the best.)

As I say, I wanted to be just like my ma. I wanted to be a pirate. The problem was

I could not wait. And that's how I got into all that trouble.

Mind you, it was just as well I did cause that trouble, because it was me who saved the life of Grace O'Malley, Pirate Queen of Connacht.

I remember the night we sat in the great hall of the castle. The chill wind blew wild around Clare Island and all the shutters



in Ireland couldn't keep it out. Even the blazing log fire didn't warm the room very much. My ma and her captains sat close to the fire. The poor peasants and the children like me shivered in the draughty dim corners with the dogs.



The last crumb of bread was eaten and the last bit of mutton gristle spat on the floor and Grace O'Malley filled her wine cup. "Here's good luck to the pirates of Connacht!" she cried. "And may the seas be full of treasure ships tomorrow!"



The captains cheered and the sailors on the benches waved their hats. In the corners we coughed and sniffled.

"Tell us a story, Queen Grace!" a sailor shouted.

Of course she wasn't a real queen, just the leader of the O'Malley clan, but the pitiless pirates of Clare Island would follow her to the death. That's what mattered.

"A story?" she smiled. "I don't know any stories."

The men laughed. "Tell us about when you were a wee girl," old Hugh O'Neil called out.



“Aye!” the others cried. They settled down with their warm wine and turned to face their pirate queen.

And so she began...

## Chapter Two Sea and Swords

“When I was a girl,” Grace said, “my mother wanted me to be a lady. She taught me sewing and mending, painting and playing the lute, curling my long red hair in ringlets and making perfume from rose petals. I was so *bored* I could have jumped off the top of Clare Castle tower!”



"Hurrah!" the pirates cheered.

"I begged my father to take me with him on his next trip to Spain, but he said he wouldn't dare... my mother would kill him!"

"Haaaa!" the pirates laughed.

"So I cut off my hair, stole clothes from a serving boy, and went down to the harbour. I walked over the gangplank to my father's galley and told a sailor I was the new cabin boy.



"I hid in a cabin till the ship was far out to sea and then I slipped away and found my father."

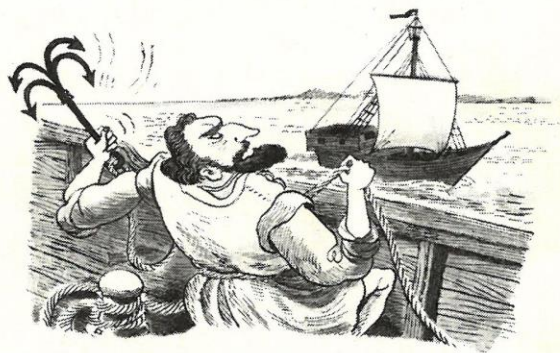


"Ooooh!" the pirates sighed, knowing what a fierce temper the old chief had.

"First he said he'd throw me over the side to feed the fishes. But I told him I was too skinny to feed a minnow. He laughed and said I could stay, but if he attacked another ship, I had to go below deck. And so I sailed to Spain with my father's fleet of four galleys."

“Hurrah!”

“One morning the lookout sighted an English cog and the crew raced to clear the decks. Father was too busy to notice me on the forecastle. That cog was as slow as a donkey in the water and we soon caught up with her, threw grappling lines across and made ready to climb aboard.”



“Ooooh!”

“But what Father didn’t know was the cog had a troop of English soldiers aboard, and instead of us jumping aboard them, *they* jumped onto our decks.”

“Ahhhh!”

“Swords flashed and muskets blasted. I didn’t want to be trapped in a cabin with no way out. So I climbed the rigging ropes that hung from the main mast and watched them fighting down below. Slowly, the English drove back our crew, and my father was facing an evil English soldier...”



"Down with the English," the pirates muttered.

"Then my father's sword snapped. He was helpless. The English soldier raised his weapon to split my father's skull in two. And that's when I jumped from the rigging, landed on the enemy's sword arm and saved my father's life.



"Father picked up the sword and gave a mighty scream. Aieeee! He led the men forward and drove the English into the sea."

"Hurrah!"

"And from that time on I was a member of the crew. And now I am your leader."

The men roared and drank and others stood up to tell their tales. But it was the *start* of Ma's story that *I* remembered. That's what kept me awake that night under my sheepskin cloak... not just the cold. And that's why I did what I did the next day...