

An Excerpt from *The Pirate Queen*  
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1535

“STORM BORN”

FIVE YEARS OLD

The girl lifts a knife and, with one trembling swipe, severs her braid. In all fairness, the steel is sharp. Cook put it to the whetstone just this morning. But still, it is a shock to see the limp, dead thing in her hand. Like some rock pipit with threadbare wings. Or a clump of wilted flowers. Yet she shakes it in her father's face and hopes that her fear looks like anger instead.

He lurches forward a step. Eyes round and horrified. A hand outstretched as though to stop her. “What have you done, bird?”

“Now my hair won't get caught in the ropes,” she says. “Now I'll be going with you.”

He shakes his head. “That's not what I meant. That's not what I—”

“It's what you *said*.”

He lied. They both know it. But now she's called him out—in front of his crew, no less—and she can see the storm building in his

eyes. To plead with her father in private is one thing. She has done so every day for a year. But to challenge him here, while he has one foot onshore and the other on deck, is a mutinous sin.

“*Gráinne*,” he warns, his voice now clipped and threatening.

Grace shifts back and forth on bare feet. It is summer, but the dock is cool and damp, the dark gray stone a balm against the jagged cut on the arch of her left foot—an injury from when she ran through the rock pools at low tide last week, looking for anemones. Grace loves the soft, red-hued creatures, how they glisten like bloody mushrooms when closed, then, once submerged again, bloom with a tentacled crown. Such a strange child, her mother says, always running barefoot, cursing the rocks. Grace feels the sting of salt water in the cut. Ignores it, afraid to break her father’s gaze. Knows that if she blinks, he will send her back to the tower house, to her mother.

The galley bobs beside the quay, sails furled tight against the masts. It looks antsy, like a child bouncing on the balls of its feet, ready to leave. There are ninety men at oars, looking elsewhere, suddenly curious about the sky and the cliffs and the dirt beneath their fingernails. But their ears are tuned to the chieftain and his daughter. Telltale signs. Those bent heads and furrowed brows. The only one who dares to watch the spectacle is a boy of nine. Donal. He is four years older than Grace and dark, like their father. Grace has heard her mother complain that the boy should look more like Aisling, like his own mother, that Eóin O’Malley shouldn’t have re-created himself quite so well in the bastard he made with that village girl. She thinks it would be easier to look at Donal if he didn’t wear her husband’s face. But all Grace sees when she looks at her half brother is a boy who would happily trade places with her. She knows the sea is no friend to Donal, that he returns from every voyage green around the gills. And yet, Eóin tries. With *Donal*, he tries.

“Take me with you.” It’s a tiny whisper, nearly lost in the wind and spray rushing into the harbor.

“No,” Eóin says, and he is angry now. Or perhaps ashamed. Quite often, there is little difference between the two.

But Grace is angry as well, and her chin wobbles, letting him know.

“You’ll be staying with your mother. As is right.”

“You said—”

“I made no promises.”

She shakes her head. “Isn’t fair.”

“Fair or not, that’s how it’s done. The sea is no place for a girl.”

Grace has been on *Niamb*—her father’s galley—more times than she can count. The name is carved there, on the prow, and she knows what each letter feels like beneath the pad of her fingers, though she cannot yet read any of them. The girl loves nothing more than to tuck herself into the prow, her slender arms resting on the gunwale as she traces her hand across those deep, dark grooves. She thinks *Niamb* is a beautiful name. Wishes it were hers.

Grace knows every island in Clew Bay by name and by sight. Nishoo. Collan Moore. All the Inish: Turlin, Daff, Loy, Muck, Gowla, each with its own rolling hills and beaches and cliffs. Some no bigger than a field, others stretching for miles. But she has never gone far enough into the Atlantic to lose sight of them. Has never been allowed on a trading voyage. Has never been so far from home that the fat, square tower house that looms above them on the cliff fades from view. Home. Where her mother is and where she has been told to stay. Where a girl belongs because the sea is no place for her.

“*Please.*” Begging now. It sounds pathetic even to her small ears. Grace has never heard her mother beg, is ashamed to hear herself do so now.

She waits so long for her father to answer that her feet grow cold and her eyes burn. The braid feels heavy in her hand. This moment, at the age of five—standing in the wind, shorn curls whipping her eyes, cheeks reddening in humiliation—is the first time Grace O’Malley feels hatred. Her father has lied to her, and she *hates* him for it. It burns worse than the cut on her foot.

“Take me,” she demands.

“No.”

“You said it was my hair.”

He rubs his face. Curses. “Isn’t your hair, bird. It’s *you*. Do not ask again.”

Decision made, Eóin O’Malley unwinds the mooring lines from the iron crossbar and tosses the sodden rope onto the galley. Then

he lifts his foot from the stone and sets it onto the smooth, wooden planks of *Niamh's* polished deck, the boards nearly black, gleaming in the sun.

“Prepare to shove off!”

The call comes from on board, near the prow, and the voice sounds like rocks grinding together. It belongs to Sivney, her father's first mate. He's always been kind to Grace, but he doesn't look at her now.

Donal collects the mooring lines and loops them into a pile on the deck. Steps back. Glances at Grace. *Take my place*, his eyes implore, but his lips are pressed tight.

“Shove off!” her father gives the order, and fifteen oars on the port side reach out and rest against the dock. “Push!”

*Niamh* groans and moves away from the rocky outcropping.

“Again!”

The oarsmen lean to the left, shoving the long wooden blades against the dock, then repeat the process. Now *Niamh* bobs far enough away for them to row.

“*Da.*” It is no longer a plea but an accusation, and Grace takes a step forward, reaching for him.

Eóin shakes his head. “I'm sorry, bird.”

Furious, Grace throws the braid at his head. The sight seems to startle him, and he reaches for it, on instinct, but her hair is caught by the wind and whisked away, a red sail flapping in the sun for a moment before it drops to the brackish water, tendrils spreading, soaking, then sinking.

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Maeve. Wife and mother and now . . . untangler of knots. She winces as the comb catches in what is left of her daughter's once-beautiful hair.

“Why?” Maeve asks.

Riled by the wind and her furious march up the hill, Gráinne's curls must be wetted down before they can be tamed. Maeve dips the ivory tines into a pitcher, then runs them through the now-short red strands. She combs, then lifts to see what can be salvaged and what

must be trimmed. Finding a jagged section, she holds it aloft with one hand, then snips with her scissors, watches bits of copper drift to the floor and disappear into the woven rush mat. The longest parts now fall to her daughter's chin. But the hair at her nape is little more than stubble. Gráinne is too pretty to look like a boy, but now, for the first time, she resembles Donal. An angry coil forms in Maeve's belly at the realization.

Again, she asks, "Why?"

Gráinne slumps on the stool, then looks up at the cracked looking glass. She glares at her own reflection. "Da said I could go to Galway if I cut my hair."

Maeve breathes out the curse she's so often heard her husband mutter. *Fecking Galway.*

"There is a difference between what's said and what you wish to hear. Tell me what your father *said.*"

"He said I can't go with him because my hair will get caught in the ropes."

"And you thought he'd take you if you cut it?"

A nod.

"Look at me." Maeve turns her so they are eye to eye. She leans closer. Speaks a harsh truth. "No one did this to you."

Gráinne opens her mouth to argue.

"No." Maeve gives her a gentle shake. "You did this to yourself."

"He lied."

"He's a man, isn't he? Won't be the last time."

"Fathers shouldn't lie."

Maeve looks to the window where *Niamh's* white sails bob at the far edge of the horizon. She sighs. "Neither should husbands. But they do. Do you understand me? Men. Lie. Sometimes *with* words. Sometimes without them."

"Do women lie?"

Maeve doesn't catch her smile in time, and it flashes wide across her face. Her daughter has unwittingly trapped her. To answer as she'd like, to tell her daughter no, would itself be a lie.

"*Tá.*"

"When?"

"Usually when our lives depend on it."

Gráinne thinks about his for a moment. Puckers her lips. Makes a face in the mirror. And Maeve laughs at that, at the crossed eyes and little pink tongue poking out.

“Why can’t girls go to sea?”

“Why would you want to?”

Gráinne points to the narrow window in the stone wall where two blue lines—one dark, one light—meet on the horizon. “Because everything fun is out there. I don’t want to *stay*. I want to *go*.”

Maeve is startled by what she sees in the gray eyes that look back at her. Something lovely and wild and spirited lives within those stormy depths. She would expect nothing less from the daughter she made with Eóin O’Malley. But there is something even deeper that pleads with her. A wildness Maeve has never encountered before. She blinks first, then looks away from her daughter, unnerved.

Some women are built for birthing. Broad-hipped and fertile. Maeve is not one of them. She has been pregnant a single time since she wed Eóin. The delivery was fraught, and her body tells her in whispers—that *knowing* every woman has—that there will never be another child. Once she had a life as Margaret McConaughy, but now this house, this child, is her life. Now all she has is Eóin and Gráinne. Both of them wild and unruly and in need of constant management. Her daughter, it seems, will require a great deal more than her husband.

Maeve pulls the girl close so Gráinne’s cheek rests against the nubby weave of her apron, then brushes the hair away from her little face. Kisses the top of her head. Lifts a shorn curl and twists it around her index finger. It is an effort not to cry. Her hair had truly been beautiful.

“Promise me you will never do this again.”

“Why?”

“Because men will never respect you if you try to be like them.”

Gráinne lifts her head and meets her mother’s gaze. “Then how will they respect me?”

“They won’t,” Maeve says with a shrug. Then she takes her daughter’s face in her hands and brings it close. Until their noses touch and their breath mingles. “Not unless you *make* them.”

Some days later, Eóin returns from Galway. Routine trading mission. A good haul of smoked turbot and salmon, packed in wooden barrels. It is easy enough to get the cargo to Galway, and from there it will go on to Spain, mostly, though France has developed a taste for Atlantic fish of late. He'd also carried a hold full of tallow and skins: deer, sheep, rabbit, and pine marten. The European demand grows larger every year, and he is happy to meet it. And since he was lucky enough to run across a poorly guarded English cog? Well, wasn't it only fair to take a portion of the cloth and wine it carried? Safe passage and all. Sure, he has a wife and daughter to please.

He is glad to be home. The tower house is silent, nothing but the thick oak boards creaking beneath his boots as Eóin makes a quick survey of each floor on his way up. Cellars stocked. Dungeon empty. Now to the kitchen, where Cook sleeps on her pallet beside the hearth—snoring dreadfully—with an empty mug of mead by her limp, outstretched hand. Eóin smells ashes in the banked fire and yeast where tomorrow's loaves rise beneath a towel. Dishes scrubbed and floors swept, all is tidy in Cook's domain, and he nods in approval until he sees the small bone-handled knife on the table. Remembers how it rested in Gráinne's clenched fist.

Scowling, he ascends to the next floor. Straight instead of spiral, this staircase is the only one of his fortresses not built with the traditional Norman defensive feature. The tower house had gone up when Eóin was a child, and he'd asked his father about the choice in staircase. *Your mother doesn't like the spirals* was all the old chieftain said. Eóin thought it odd at the time. He loved the circular stairs in every other family stronghold and had believed it silly that a woman should get any say at all. The thought makes him chuckle now as he passes through the Great Hall. It lies silent as well, the massive wooden table wiped clean with benches tucked beneath. One more flight of steps and here he is, kicking off his boots in the privy chamber, moving closer to where Maeve sleeps in the next room.

He might be a fool, but damn, he missed his wife. She is the surprise he never saw coming. If Maeve didn't like spiral staircases and asked him to build one made of feathers, he would kill a thousand seagulls with his bare hands and pluck their plumage until his fingers bled. Eóin was past twenty when his father arranged the marriage and was stunned when he saw her at their betrothal dinner. Stunned and

pleased and more than a little flustered. And not only because of her beauty. Maeve was not like the village girls he'd known. And, yes, bedded. He regrets that now. Regrets that he came to his marriage with a son already. What he regrets most, however, is that no one—not even him—thought to tell Maeve about Donal until after they wed and she moved to Clare Island and into this tower as *Bean an Tí*, as Lady of the House. Aisling had taken that moment to claim her right of acknowledgment and brought the boy to him. Still a *tachrán*, barely able to walk.

Above them lies the garret, separated into two small rooms beneath the slate roof. One for Gráinne, and the other for Donal. But Eóin does not allow the boy to occupy his own room. That is the only amends he can make to his wife. Though Donal spends his waking hours here, in the tower, or at sea with Eóin, he is sent home every night into the village to be with his mother. It is cruel for all of them. He wishes now that someone had bothered to tell him that though his marriage would be arranged, he might look at a girl one September day in Liscannor and fall in love on sight. He wishes that someone had bothered to tell him that he would come to regret bedding any woman before his wife.

Regret, it seems, is the burden of being Chief of the Name of the Clan O'Malley. He is *the* O'Malley—a title that can be held only by a single man at any given time, a title that gives him the power to make treaties, declare war, and collect rents from those who live on his lands. A power he fought to earn and has killed to keep.

Eóin peels off more of his clothing, dropping it to the woven mats as he moves from privy chamber into bedchamber. Once at the door, he stands and watches his wife.

Maeve is a messy sleeper, sprawled out in the blankets, hair loose around her shoulders, arms akimbo. No matter, he'll wrap them around himself soon enough. She wears only her léine, and he wishes for more light so he might glimpse her form beneath the thin fabric. It was what he noticed immediately upon meeting her: face and form. Seven years later, and he has still not recovered from either.

It is the midpoint of the night, and there would be no light at all if not for the peat glowing softly in the fireplace. All the candles have long since burned out. Heavy clouds surround the island, rendering

the narrow windows little more than dark slits in the stone wall. It will be raining by morning. He can feel it in his marrow.

Eóin throws the quilt back, climbs into the sliver of bed left unclaimed by his wife, leans back against the pillow, arm behind his head, and stares at Maeve.

“Will you just be lookin’, then? Or will you be doing somethin’ about it?” Her voice is heavy with sleep and insinuation.

“I didn’t think you were awake.”

“Hard not to be when you’re throwing boots against the wall.”

“I didn’t throw them.” He feigns offense, then bends low to press a kiss beneath her ear. “I set them down. Daintily.”

“Might as well have launched them from a catapult,” she mumbles. “Could have woken my granny, and she’s been dead ten years.”

Eóin scoots closer to his wife and pulls her against him, until her back is pressed into his chest and his arm is looped across her waist. He buries his face in the crook of her neck. Inhales the scent of her skin. Salt and mint and lavender. It would be easy enough to let sleep take him now, let it roll over him like a wave. He would be happily smothered beneath its weight. Until she speaks.

“Why did you lie to her?”

His heart catches. Like a rusted key in an old lock. It has been many years since he’s lied to a woman. Since he made promises he had no intention of keeping. He’s not done so since he married Maeve. But a number of faces flash before his eyes—Aisling among them—and he flinches. He’s certain she can feel his body stiffen.

“What do you mean?”

“Gráinne believes what you tell her. You could say that if she flapped her arms fast enough, she could fly to the moon, and that girl would repeat it to me later as fact. You should be telling her the *truth*, that girls can’t go to sea. That it’s bad luck, or the men would revolt, or the sea god *Manannán* would take every one of you to the depths, or whatever shite it is that you believe about those damned boats. Instead, you told her that her hair would get caught in the ropes. Why?”

He has thought of that braid every day since he left. The way it sank into the water and disappeared. When Gráinne ran back to the tower house, the knife was still gripped in her small fist. All that first day at sea he’d imagined her tripping, falling on the blade.

He shrugs against Maeve's body. "It's the way she looks at *Niamh*, isn't it?"

"How does she look at it?"

"Like she *wants* it."

"And *that* angers you?" she asks.

Eóin is tired, or he wouldn't say it. But a day at sea, then a day in *fecking Galway*, then another day at sea has left him exhausted and stupid. So the words tumble out, and he cannot muster the strength to stop them.

"Donal doesn't look at *Niamh* that way. He's afraid of every boat he sets foot on."

If *his* body had stiffened before, *hers* turns to stone. A boulder. A fortress. She might as well be the cliffs of Croaghnaun, made of cold, jagged quartzite. Maeve turns to stone, then turns away.

*Donal.*

*Eóin, you fool, you drab,* he thinks.

Maeve hates talking about the boy.

But what is he to do?

Eóin was still young when he swived Donal's mother on that knoll above the village. And she'd gone willingly enough, wanting to wear that green gown, to be clothed in nothing but grass. He learned early that the chieftain's son doesn't have to beg a girl. They all want the man, the title. They want to be Lady of the House. Aisling went without promises of any kind. But he cannot say he didn't know what might happen. Of *course* he did. He's been around barnyards his entire life. It's just that—in the moment—he didn't *care*. He was seventeen and she was lifting her skirts and that had been as far as his thoughts had gone. But now he has a son and a wife and a daughter. In that order. And it seems as though he cannot do right by any of them.

"Maeve?" he asks, urging her out of silence.

"I wish I'd known about him," she says.

"Would it have changed your mind?"

"Wouldn't have mattered, would it? The decision wasn't mine. It was arranged between our fathers."

"*Tá*. But do you regret it?"

"It would have been nice to know what I was coming here to manage."

They'd arrived at Clare Island besotted with each other seven years

ago. They'd married and consummated and had each been delighted by the good match made for them. Both clans strengthened, with the added bonus of attraction. He'd loved the sight of her naked and was pleased that she felt the same about him. The rest would grow from their union, he was certain of it. Then Aisling had walked into the tower house during their celebration, leading Donal by his chubby hand, and presented his son before an audience. To his new bride, Aisling drove a wedge that he still cannot pry loose.

He exhales a sigh onto her bare shoulder. "I should have told you."

Eóin ponders more of an apology, but what good would it do? Telling Maeve he's sorry won't make Donal any less real. Nor will it give him the chance to go back and turn away when Aisling took his hand and led him toward that knoll. All of it happened years before he ever went to Liscannor or saw all that glorious red hair of Maeve's. Her blue eyes. Her smile wide as the horizon.

"I did not realize I'd married a liar," Maeve says, and she could not have cut him more cleanly had she taken a knife to his throat.

"That isn't fair," he whispers.

"Isn't it? You lied to me. And you lied to our daughter."

"What would you have me do?" he asks, reaching for her even as she scoots out of reach.

"Make it right," she says.

"How?" he asks, thinking of Donal. Would she have him send the boy away? Though he does not love Aisling—has *never* loved her—he does love the boy.

"Take Gráinne with you."

"What?" He lifts onto his elbow and peers at her in the dim light.

"Take her to sea. It's all she wants."

The idea is so foreign to him she might as well have asked him to grow a pair of antlers. Eóin O'Malley has never been to sea with a woman. He takes his family through the Bay on *Niamh* often enough. But open water? It is the worst kind of luck. He would tell his wife that such a thing is an abomination if he did not fear that she would turn him from the bed.

Eóin is silent for so long Maeve laughs.

"Are you a coward then?" she asks.

He might be besotted with his wife, but he'll not tolerate such

disrespect. His chest fills with righteous indignation. But his voice catches when she speaks again.

“Do you remember the night she was born?”

His lungs deflate like sails in a lull. “Of course I do.”

“When my pains started, you said that our child would be storm born, that it was a *good* omen.”

“You didn’t think so at the time.”

“Well, I thought I was going to die, didn’t I? I’ve been told it’s a normal reaction.”

“By who? Missus Canavan?” Eóin hears the bitterness in his own words.

There is a single midwife on Clare Island, and she happens to be Aisling’s mother. He had insisted on being in the room with Maeve as she labored, even though Missus Canavan argued. He would not trust the life of his wife and unborn child in the hands of a woman who had every interest in seeing them die in childbed. The old bitch had sulked from sunset to sunrise, but Gráinne was born alive and Maeve was breathing, too, and that was all he could possibly hope for after such a long night.

“Was my own mam who told me that,” Maeve says, though he hears the humor in her voice and is grateful for it, “said no woman ever despairs more than in the hours before pushing a child into the world.”

God, he needs sleep. Every word he says pours salt into an open wound.

“I’ve never seen a worse storm than the one our daughter was born into. Hours of pelting rain and shattering thunder.” Maeve sits up and leans over him, her eyes almost black in the dim light. “After all that, did you really think the sea wouldn’t call to her?”

He hasn’t once thought about the circumstances of her birth since the moment Gráinne was put into his arms.

Finally, to his relief, Maeve reaches out and lays a hand against his cheek. “What color are her eyes?”

He hears the surrender in his own voice. “Gray.”

“Gray like what?”

“Like the sea.”

She smiles at him.

“And you think her eyes are gray because she belongs to the sea?” he asks.

“No,” Maeve answers, lowering herself so that her head rests upon his chest. “I think they are gray because the sea belongs to *her*.”

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It does not occur to either of them that the girl might not be in bed. In fact, Grace sits at the base of the stairs leading into the privy chamber, her soft round cheek pressed against the cool stone wall, listening to the story of her birth. Is that a storm building in the harbor now? Or only her imagination? She shivers with anticipation even as the skin prickles along the back of her neck.

For three days, she has been pushing hair out of her eyes and her mouth. She cannot tie it back or stop it from whipping in the wind. Even if her mother hadn't made her promise, she would have determined never to cut it again. But now, after listening to her father explain his lie, she is grateful for her rash behavior. It got his attention. She thinks maybe it is a stroke of luck. And that knives are not such dangerous toys after all. Maybe she should keep one with her always?

There is silence in the bedchamber, so she assumes they have fallen asleep. Though she yawns, Grace does not return to bed. Not yet. Instead, she glides down the stairs on the balls of her feet. One floor. Two. She is swift and quiet, like the byre cat she sneaks into her room every night, bound up in her shawl.

She comes to a stop in the middle of the kitchen. Checks that Cook is asleep.

The concept of stealing is foreign to Grace. As far as she has been taught, this is her home and therefore everything in it belongs to her. So it is no crime to reach up and take the bone-handled knife.

Swift feet propel her back to the garret, and when she passes the privy chamber, she wonders if her parents have fallen into bad dreams. Why else the moaning? Or maybe they are still afraid of storms? No matter. Grace crawls back into bed and tucks the knife beneath her pillow. The cat is on her blanket, as usual, and snuggles closer at her return. The girl listens to the *tap-tap-tapping* of water on the slate roof only a few feet from her head and smiles.

She is storm born.  
Knives bring good luck.  
The sea belongs to *her*.

*It is mine, it is mine, it is mine*, the refrain—as insistent as the storm—lulls her back to sleep: *The sea is mine*.