

The image is a book cover for 'Merciless Reason' by Oisín McGann. It features a central illustration of a man in a top hat playing a violin. The background is a complex, steampunk-style scene with gears, a cityscape, and a bright, glowing light source. The title 'Merciless REASON' is prominently displayed in the center, with 'REASON' in a large, metallic, serif font. The author's name 'Oisín McGann' is at the top, and a tagline is at the bottom.

Oisín McGann

Merciless
REASON

He wants to save the world.
He must be stopped.

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About the Book

'There's no escaping this family. I'd have an easier time shaking off the plague.'

It has been three years since Nate left Ireland - and his ruthless, feared family - behind. But the Wildensterns are not finished with him. When he discovers his treacherous cousin is still alive, he is drawn back into their world of plotting, betrayal and murder.

At home, Daisy and Tatiana are among the few who are trying to stem the damage the Wildensterns are doing. The family has become even more hated by the people it treads upon in its thirst for power.

One thing is for certain - the Wildensterns are back. Violence will ensue.

Merciless
REASON

Oisín McGANN

CORGI BOOKS

*For Inga, Danu and Oscar - three wonderfully mad
kids, who keep me sane in a nutty business*

THE WILDENSTERN FAMILY

The Rules of Ascension

With the intention of encouraging the qualities of aggression, strength and ambition, the family will sanction the act of assassination of one family member by another, under eight strict conditions - the Rules of Ascension. They are as follows:

Number One: The Act of Aggression must be committed by the Aggressor himself and not by any agent or servant.

Number Two: The Act must only be committed against a man over the age of sixteen who holds a superior rank in the family to the Aggressor.

Number Three: The Act must only be committed for the purpose of advancing one's position and not out of spite, or because of insult or offence given, or to satisfy a need for revenge for an insult or injury given to a third party.

Number Four: All efforts should be made to avoid the deaths of servants while committing the Act. Good servants are hard to find.

Number Five: The Target of the Aggression can use any and all means to defend themselves, and is under an obligation to do so for the good of the family.

Number Six: Retribution against the Aggressor can only be carried out after the Act has been committed. Should the Aggressor fail in his attempt, and subsequently escape to remain at large for a full day, only the Target of the

Aggression and no other person will be permitted to take Retribution.

Number Seven: No Act of Aggression or Retribution must be witnessed or reported by any member of the public. All family matters must be kept confidential.

Number Eight: Any bodies resulting from the Act must be given a proper burial in a cemetery, crypt, catacomb or funeral pyre approved by the family.

A COMPENDIUM OF THE CHARACTERS

Edgar Wildenstern (deceased) - Patriarch of the family and Chairman of the North American Trading Company. Murdered at the dinner table not long after the death of his eldest son.

Miriam Wildenstern (deceased) - Wife to Edgar and mother to Marcus, Berto, Nathaniel and Tatiana. Committed to a mental asylum, then later imprisoned in the house until her death.

Marcus Wildenstern (deceased) - The eldest of the Wildenstern siblings, murdered while in the process of planning his father's assassination.

Berto Wildenstern (deceased) - Next in line after Marcus; served briefly (and reluctantly) as Patriarch before his own untimely death.

Nathaniel Wildenstern - Eldest surviving son of Edgar Wildenstern and rightful Patriarch of the family. Now missing, presumed to have taken leave of his senses.

Daisy Wildenstern - Widow to Berto. De facto managing director of the family business, despite her disadvantages as a woman.

Gerald Gordon - Nathaniel's cousin. A scientific prodigy, acting as Patriarch in Nathaniel's absence.

Tatiana Wildenstern - Nathaniel's high-spirited younger sister. The youngest of the Wildenstern siblings and Daisy's closest friend and ally.

Cathal Dempsey - A recently discovered young cousin of the Wildensterns, now living with them. Gerald's protégé, but close friend to Daisy and Tatiana.

Clancy - Nathaniel's former manservant.

Lieutenant William Dempsey - Cathal's father.

Elvira Gordon - Edgar's sister, Gerald's mother. Oldest living Wildenstern female.

Gideon Wildenstern - Edgar's younger brother.

Oliver Wildenstern - Gideon's son.

Elizabeth Wildenstern - One of four ancients raised from the dead some years ago. Her brothers, Hugo and Brutus, and sister, Brunhilde, died in the conflict that followed.

Leopold Wildenstern - Illegitimate son of Elizabeth and Nathaniel.

Detective Inspector Urskin - Police officer with the Royal Irish Constabulary, tasked with combating Irish revolutionaries.

Eamon Duffy - Irish revolutionary and self-made businessman.

Red - Career criminal and Gerald's chief enforcer.

Thomas 'Harmonica' Radigan - A bounty hunter from the United States.

The Irish Republican Brotherhood (the Fenians) - Irish revolutionary group.



Prologue

THE LEVIATHAN

Then, as if things weren't bad enough, a storm struck. The ship's timbers groaned as the vessel clambered through the growing banks of water. Heavy waves slammed against the tired, wooden hull and crashed across her decks. Men were swept off their feet, only their lifelines saving them from being carried overboard. It was next to impossible to keep your footing on the heaving deck, the sickening motion made worse by the sudden, jarring impacts of the waves.

Bushnell, her black-bearded captain, bellowed for more sail. Clinging to the wheel, the first mate, Pollard, automatically passed on the order at the top of his voice, the shout faltering as he realized what he was ordering. Able Seaman Jim Hawkins heard the shout with a sinking feeling in his gut. The rain glued his blond hair and beard to his lean, sombre face.

The ship was already taking on water, creaking ominously under the strain brought on by its current speed. Trying to catch more wind was madness. As it was, the gales were threatening to rip the sails from the masts.

The *Odin* was a three-masted Yankee whaler out of New Bedford, Massachusetts. She was a tough old ship, purpose-built to be fast, rugged and self-sufficient for voyages of up to four years. She carried five longboats for

hunting the whales, all equipped with Greener guns for firing harpoons. The ship had her own try works – a brick furnace just behind the foremast, for processing the oil from the blubber cut from the carcasses of the great beasts after they were caught and killed.

But the fire in the furnace had long gone out. The huge casks in the ship's hold were empty of oil. Her maintenance had become neglected as the captain had grown more and more irrational. Jim swore bitterly as he scrambled across the slippery boards of the deck, making for the bow. They had not caught a single whale after months of hunting. It had taken the crew a while to realize that Bushnell had no interest in running down the sperm whales that were their normal prey. He had spun them a yarn that there were rich pickings out in these dangerous Atlantic waters off the coast of New England. The rumours of sea monsters in this area were just fairy tales for scaring children to bed, he'd said. Pay them no mind.

The first mate had whispered one of those stories to Jim one evening, when they were both on watch. Word was, Pollard said, that Captain Bushnell's son had been on board a whaler sunk in these waters. She went down with all hands, watched helplessly by the crew of another ship. And she was sunk, Pollard added, by a monster of enormous size. His ruddy, broken-veined face betrayed his anxiety. Sneaking gulps of rum from a flask, the *Odin's* first mate told Jim the story because he feared they were being led to their deaths. He was certain that the old man was out for vengeance.

Now, after months of fruitless searching, they had found it. Or rather, it had found them. The first they knew of it, the creature had run up against their starboard side and stove in the timbers just aft of the surgeon's quarters. The carpenters were struggling frantically to stem the leak as others pumped and bailed the water out. Even so, the ship was listing to starboard, leaning into the wind.

It took courage to be a whaleman, and only the toughest dared to hunt the sperm whale, the most dangerous of all. But this creature was like nothing they had ever seen - a true leviathan.

The captain ordered them to give chase even as the storm descended on them.

Bushnell's roars were drowned out by the howl of the wind; it shrieked through the rigging, filling out the sails with a noise like giant doors slamming. Raindrops fell like bullets, sweeping down off the sails in wide sheets. Jim was thrown against the gunwale as the bow pitched into another wave, the water hitting him with the force of a predator, ice-cold jaws closing around him, swallowing him and gargling him in its throat. He felt the rope pull taut around his waist, grabbed it and reefed it in, pulling himself in against the foremast. Gasping for air, he was back on his feet even as the water washed away. He staggered towards the ratlines, the web-like rigging strung to the top section of the mast. It was lunacy to let out more sail, but the captain would not be defied. The scars on Jim's back were still healing after the last flogging he had received.

The desperately unhappy lookouts clung to their perches at the tops of the masts. They had lost sight of the leviathan in the squall. If it escaped them, there would be hell to pay. Jim started climbing, his cold, numb hands clutching at the wet ropes. Looking across, he saw Zachariah, the boatswain, scaling the ratlines on the other side. One of the thousands of freed Negro slaves who had flocked to the whaling industry, Zachariah was a loud-mouthed bully, but a sound whaleman and utterly fearless. He let out a raucous laugh as he raced Jim up to the yardarm.

'Thar she blows!' one of the lookouts cried. 'Three points on the lee bow! A hundred and fifty yards!'

Other voices carried the cry down to the captain. Jim looked forward and off to the port side, in the direction the

wind was blowing. There he saw the twin jets of steam rising from the rolling sea: the leviathan, a massive silvery shape moving quickly away from them.

‘Keep your eye on him!’ the captain shouted. ‘Mr Pollard! Stand by to lower boats!’

Even though they knew it was coming, the crew looked at one another in disbelief. Only a madman would take a whaleboat out in seas like this. The smallest of these waves could swamp it. Pollard and another crewman struggled to keep the wheel under control. The first mate was a Nantucket man, come from a long line of sailors, but there were some places even he would not follow his captain. As he began speaking, the leviathan disappeared beneath the waves.

‘Sir! We’ll never catch it!’ he protested. ‘It’s turning into the wind! Even if we launch the boats, we’ll never be able to—’

It was as far as he got before Bushnell’s fist caught him on the jaw, knocking him back across the deck.

‘Twenty lashes for you, Pollard, when I can spare the bloody time!’ the captain roared as he took the helm. ‘Lower the boats! Let’s sink our irons into this demon!’

Then something slammed into the bow of the ship, stopping her dead in her tracks, splitting timbers and hurling men into the sea, their lifelines serving only to break their backs before snapping like threads. All over the deck, men tumbled helplessly against walls and gunwales.

Jim felt the initial jolt through the ropes before the rigging cracked like a whip, nearly throwing him out into the sky. He barely managed to hold on. The ratlines were still shaking when he heard a loud, cracking sound. There was another shudder through the rigging and he looked down to see the bow plunging underwater, the bowsprit splintering like a matchstick against something beneath the surface.

But that wasn't the sound that Jim heard. The foremast was starting to tilt over. It was cracking at the base and leaning drunkenly to one side, dragging sails and rigging with it. Jim and Zachariah looked at one another and then started to scramble down the lines.

They jumped the last ten feet, just as the mast crashed down on the port side, driving a gash into the gunwale before toppling into the sea. The water caught it and twisted it back against the hull of the ship, pulling more rigging into the water. Jim, sprawled in a tangle of lines, saw a rope snake past him at high speed. Zachariah was on hands and knees, trying to free himself from the mess of ratlines.

'Rope!' Jim yelled.

But it was too late; a loop of rope closed around the boatswain's hand. He tried to snatch it out but the loop jerked tight and tore away three of his fingers. He screamed and threw blood from the stumps as he flailed around. Jim rose and stumbled back, distracted long enough to step into a knot of other lines just as they were being dragged overboard by the weight of the mast. It took him by the ankle, jerked him off his feet and swept him over the side. The icy water stamped the air out of his lungs. The yardarm followed him off the deck, nearly coming down on his head, hitting the water by his shoulder.

It took all of his nerve to suppress the panic as he searched for air. He was caught in a web of ropes, and the more he thrashed the more tangled he became. One of the jib sails had landed next to him and he was being drawn underneath it. That would drown him for sure.

Pulling out his pocketknife, he cut his lifeline, still bound to the fallen mast, and then started sawing through the thicker rope around his ankle. It seemed to take for ever. The blade slipped a couple of times, drawing blood, but he paid it no mind. Finally, with his lungs spasming, the last strands parted and he slipped through the gaps in the

swirling ropes, striking out towards the dull light above him.

He barely had time to get a breath before a wave crashed down on him. Jim lost all sense of direction, tumbling in the churning water. It was impossible to tell which way was up. Then he ran into a timber wall. The hull of the ship. He scrabbled up it, jamming the point of his knife in to try and get purchase, following the hull's curve to the surface and heaving in breaths of air.

The *Odin* should have been long gone, leaving him in her wake, but he wasn't going to complain. He screamed for help over and over again. The ship was side-on to the wind now, leaning away from it at a perilous angle, brought almost to a complete halt. Surely they were waiting to rescue their drowning men? The captain must have come to his senses and stopped the chase. But something made Jim turn round. Out there, not far off in the roiling darkness, he saw a metallic grey, serrated dorsal fin rise from the water, approaching the ship at terrifying speed.

The first time the leviathan had struck the ship, it had been a glancing blow. The second time, when the mast fell, it had crippled the vessel. The *Odin* would not stand a third strike. Jim kicked away from the hull and started swimming. He spotted a coffin-sized wooden sea-chest floating in the water ahead of him and made for it. Grabbing on with difficulty to the box with his frozen hands, he turned to look back at the ship.

The monster left a tumultuous white wake trailing behind it as it charged towards the vessel. The dorsal fin must have been nearly forty feet behind the head, for it was still in clear water when the deep bass crunch of the impact carried through the air. The fin kept going, sinking below the surface and disappearing.

As he was carried up onto the crest of a wave, Jim saw air belch from the belly of the ship, saw shattered ribs and

protruding beams in the waist of the vessel as the water rushed in to fill the *Odin's* carcass.

The dorsal fin broke the surface again, coming back towards him. It was slower now, as if calmer, having despatched its enemy. There was no way he could escape it. The sea bulged over the leviathan's back, trailing strands of foam outside of the clear white V of the fin's wake. Jim saw two clusters of pale green lights beneath his feet as its head passed under him. Its eyes. Around them, he spied long spines, like whiskers or feelers.

The creature was at least as long as the *Odin* - probably longer. It was by far the largest engimal he had ever encountered, much bigger than any land behemoth. As the hump of its silver-grey back rose under him, Jim found himself wading, as if walking up a moving beach. Unable to stay on his feet as the water dropped around him, he let the massive back come up under him and carry him and his wooden chest for some distance. The leviathan's skin appeared to be some kind of soft, flexible *metal*, dotted with clumps of barnacles. The remains of harpoons jutted like spines from its hide. The scars of a hundred battles crisscrossed its skin, along with triangular markings of darker grey on the silver, mimicking the broken surface of an unsettled sea. Jim ran his fingers over the netted texture.

The creature started to submerge again. Jim slipped off its back. It was only then, when he had returned to the water, clutching his box again, that he spotted the line of faint circular lights along the leviathan's side. Almost like ... almost like windows, he thought.

Then it was gone, a last flick of its tail flukes tossing spray into the air. Treading water to face the oncoming waves, Jim had no choice but to let them toss him and drop him while he put his faith in his trusty sea-chest to keep him afloat. Whenever he got the chance, he turned his attention back to his ship.

The Odin was almost on her side, the ragged remnants of her sails dipping in the water. Her crew - what was left of them - were struggling to launch the longboats. By the time they saw the huge wave, it was too late. Like a moving mountain, it rushed towards the stricken ship, curling over and collapsing on her, burying her in water and leaving nothing but scattered debris. It continued on towards Jim, bearing down on him. He hugged the wooden box, closing his eyes as it loomed over him, its heaving wall lifting him, carrying him upwards, a mere speck on its surface, before the top of the watery cliff face broke into foam and fell upon him.

I

THE MISSING DUKE OF LEINSTER



HMS *SCAFELL* WAS a ship-of-the-line, carrying seventy-four guns. Her gun deck alone was over one hundred and eighty feet long. Built to be powerful but nimble, she was one of a breed of ships that made up the backbone of the Royal Navy. With elegant lines, sturdy construction, her intimidating firepower and a highly-disciplined crew of more than five hundred men, the *Scaffell* represented all the qualities that had enabled Britain's navy to rule the seas for more than two hundred years.

She could have been a leaky gondola for all Jim cared. As long as her crew had water and food aboard and got him out of the sea, he'd kiss their feet for the rest of his life if they wanted. The ship's lookouts spotted the floating field of debris from the *Odin* two days after the storm. Jim's voice was failing him by the time the ship drew near enough to hear him. His arms ached from clutching the sea-chest, his body exhausted, his mind confused by salted, water-dazzled eyes and shimmering hallucinations.

Still, he didn't stop hoarsely calling out until he saw the longboat being lowered and rowed towards him. They handed him a flask of water even as he was hauled into the

boat. He drank too much at first, his thirst-shrunken stomach throwing most of it back up.

The day was bright, the sun casting warmth out of a washed-out blue sky, but Jim shivered uncontrollably when he was brought up on the deck of the ship and wrapped in blankets. He was half led, half carried down to the surgeon, who pronounced him 'remarkably healthy, given the circumstances'.

The captain and second lieutenant joined him in the sick bay, sitting on chairs across from him and introducing themselves as Captain James Wyndham and Lieutenant William Dempsey. They were both dressed in their immaculate Royal Navy uniforms; dark blue jackets with epaulettes on the shoulders, worn over white trousers. Their turnout was a stark contrast to the rough and ready clothes worn aboard the whaler. The men were eager to question Jim, but were decent enough to wait until he had drunk his fill of water and eaten two bowls of chicken broth. He was happy to make them wait.

'Best grub I've had in months,' he croaked at last in his Liverpool accent. Sitting back in the bunk, he looked up at the officers. 'Been livin' on salt horse and biscuits and tea with molasses for what seems like for ever. Gets so you don't even mind the weevils or cockroaches in 'em - adds a bit of variety.'

'You were on the *Odin*?' Captain Wyndham asked.

He was a competent-looking man in his fifties, with a pronged moustache and salt-and-pepper hair. His tone was businesslike, but not unkind.

'Aye, sir,' Jim grunted. 'Ship went down with all 'ands but me. Twenty-eight good men.'

'You were lucky it was only a summer storm. In winter in these parts, the cold would kill you minutes after you entered the water.'

'Tell that to me gonads,' Jim sniffed. 'It'll be days before they unshrivel.'

‘Mind your tongue, m’lad. We don’t stand for foul language on Her Majesty’s vessels. Had you been aboard the *Odin* long?’

‘Me and a bunch o’ lads joined the crew at Boston in April, while the ship was in for repairs,’ Jim said. ‘Thought they were settin’ out for a normal voyage, but Captain Bushnell had plans of his own. Out for revenge for the death of his son, so he was. I’d bet a month’s wages even the owners didn’t know.’

‘So what happened?’ Wyndham inquired.

Jim told them everything about the *Odin*’s last day, wondering if they would scoff at his description of the monster. They didn’t bat an eyelid. There were more than enough tales doing the rounds about colossal creatures from the depths - including this one off the New England coast.

‘We’ve heard such stories before,’ the captain said, nodding. ‘The loss of a ship is a tragedy under any circumstances, but to be attacked by this ... this abomination ... its existence is an affront to God. Perhaps, someday, Her Majesty’s Navy will turn its attentions to destroying the beast.’

Lieutenant Dempsey, a muscular-looking man in his forties or fifties with dark skin almost Mediterranean or even Arabic in complexion, framed by black hair and garnished with a clipped little moustache, nodded but said nothing. Jim noticed the man was studying him closely, as if his story was of only passing interest, to be set aside at the earliest opportunity. Captain Wyndham confirmed Jim’s suspicions.

‘As it happens, we were in the area, searching for the *Odin*,’ the captain told him. ‘We have been seconded to the North American Trading Company and have been tasked with finding a gentleman named Nathaniel Wildenstern, the Duke of Leinster. He went missing about three years ago. Our investigations led us to Boston, and we suspect he may

have joined the *Odin's* crew there. There is a reward for anyone who can help find him. Do you know him?’

Jim appeared to think for a moment, but then shrugged and shook his head.

‘No, sir. Never ‘eard of ‘im.’

‘He may well be travelling under an assumed name,’ the second lieutenant spoke up. ‘In his current state, his dress and appearance might not be that of a gentleman. We have a picture of him here. Perhaps you could take a look at it.’

A sepia photograph was laid on the table in front of him. It showed a proud-looking young man with a somewhat long but handsome visage and fair hair cut in a dashing style. Jim regarded the image for some time. It was so unlike his own, his face burnt by the wind and sun, his hair and beard faded and bedraggled. He reached out to touch the picture for a moment, then pushed it back across the table.

‘Sorry, no. Doesn’t ring any bells. Whaler captains aren’t picky, they’ll take on anyone who’ll work. But he looks a bit posh for a life in whalin’ if y’ask me.’

‘We didn’t,’ Wyndham replied as he stood up, quickly followed by Dempsey. ‘All right. Given that the ship we were after is now at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, it seems that our trail ends in Boston for now. We will return there and set you ashore. You will be provided with some fresh clothes and accommodated as a passenger until we reach port.’

‘I’m ‘appy to work me way,’ Jim insisted.

‘This is a ship-of-the-line of Her Majesty’s Royal Navy,’ the captain informed him. ‘Every man here has his place and his duties. Your help is not required. We are three days from Boston, four at the most. Please take this opportunity to convalesce, make sure you are presentable whenever you leave your cabin and try to stay out of the way. Good day, Mr Hawkins.’

The lieutenant nodded again and followed his captain out of the room. But there was something in Dempsey's expression as he cast a look back at Jim before leaving; something like barely suppressed hatred.

Jim was quartered in the clerk's cabin, a small, simple room that still felt like luxury after the cramped quarters on board the whaler. The clerk had been most understanding as he vacated his cabin, regarding Jim's survival as nothing less than a miracle. Jim slept for most of the rest of the day, eventually rising in the evening to pull on the clothes the cabin boy had provided for him.

One look out the porthole told him the fine weather was holding, but there was enough wind to enable the ship to make good time. It was an excellent vessel, so big that he could barely feel the motion of the water beneath his feet. He should have felt safe here, but he didn't. The sooner they got back to port, the better.

The rest had done him good, but his whole body still ached. His face, neck and arms were badly sunburnt, and the gashes in his back from his most recent flogging stung constantly. The edges of the cuts were white and swollen from being immersed for so long in the salt water. Jim left his shirt off, staring at himself in the small rectangular mirror propped on the cabin's tiny desk. He read the worst events in his life, carved there in the scars on his skin. His new injuries would fade in a matter of days. He never had to suffer pain for very long: it was a quality that ran in his family.

'You should keep yourself covered up,' a voice said from behind him.

He turned to see Lieutenant Dempsey standing in the doorway. There was open hostility written on his dark-skinned face and it put Jim on edge. Something familiar in the officer's posture, his looks, bothered Jim, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

'The captain is a very able man,' Dempsey told him, stepping inside and pulling the curtain across the doorway. He spoke softly. 'But he is blinded by his perception of class. We have a detailed description of the scars on your body - the one on your side and the one over your heart are particularly noticeable. And even though we know you've been working in manual labour and as a sailor since you left Africa, the captain still can't imagine a gentleman ending up looking like the tramp he saw when you came aboard.'

Nathaniel Wildenstern glanced down at his own chest and then stared back at the officer. He didn't answer immediately. He had not been recognized in over a year.

'No doubt he'll have a change of heart when he sees how well I scrub up,' he said. 'Or, if he is so sure that the clothes make the man, perhaps I'll be able to persuade him I'm one of his crew if I slip on some blue and whites.'

'Wyndham's no spark, but he's no fool either,' Dempsey continued. 'If he sees your scars, he'll recognize you. Don't shave off your beard until you leave the ship. And see if you can keep up the Liverpool accent - if that's what it's supposed to be.'

'What's your game, then?' Nate asked. 'Why aren't you telling him?'

Dempsey scowled. Casting his eyes over his shoulder to check the curtain behind him, he moved closer to Nate.

'I have no great love for the Wildenstern family,' he said in a hoarse whisper. 'My wife is dead because of them, and they have all but stolen my son. He lives with them now, and they chose my ship to send in search of you so as to keep me out of their way. I have been back once since my wife died and had to seek permission to see my own son. I'm happy to cause your family any distress I can.'

'Cathal,' Nate said, almost to himself, searching old, unpleasant memories. 'You're Cathal Dempsey's father.'

‘Not if the bloody Wildensterns have anything to say about it, I’m not.’

‘And yet, if you brought me back, you would see your son again,’ Nate said, moving backwards slightly so that he could lean on the desk, where his knife lay beneath his shirt. ‘Why don’t you want me to be found?’

‘Because to Hell with them, that’s why!’ Dempsey growled, clenching his teeth. ‘I’ll get my son back my way and make sure the thrice-damned, night-soiled cur who took him pays a heavy price.’

‘Now I know where your son gets his charming bloody-mindedness,’ Nate observed. ‘I seem to remember my young sister learning some delightful swearwords from him.’

‘I know why you fled your family, Nathaniel Wildenstern,’ the lieutenant went on. ‘And I can tell you, they have grown worse in your absence. Ireland is suffering because of their infernal schemes.’

‘Really? Doesn’t sound like much has changed at all.’

The officer glared at him, and for a moment Nate thought he saw something of himself in the Navy man. The same loss, the same bottomless anger. Dempsey’s wife had been a Wildenstern. She had been exiled from the family and imprisoned in a mental institution before she met him. Years later, she had been killed for her Wildenstern blood – the same blood that made Cathal so valuable to the family. Dempsey had good reason to hate them. This would not be a good time for Nate to mention that it was he who had brought the man’s son to Wildenstern Hall. His fingers were close to the knife, but it was purely reflex; this man was no threat to him. Not yet, anyway.

‘If you had any sense of duty, you would go back and join the struggle against them,’ Dempsey said. ‘But I suppose any man who has spent the last three years running away from his demons, as you have, can hardly be expected to change his colours.’

'I have no colours left,' Nate retorted. 'And my demons are all dead. Tell your captain who I am if you wish, or don't tell him. It's all the same to me. I'm past caring.'

'I don't think you are,' Dempsey replied as he turned toward the doorway. 'And your family are certainly not done with you. Whether that's a good or bad thing, I'm not sure. All I know is they want you back and I can stop them from having you. That's good enough for me ... for now.' He stopped for a moment, turning back to look at Nate. 'You'll need money when you get ashore. There's a tavern called the Peggy Sayer, in Charlestown in Boston. Look for a man named Ronan. He'll pay good money for men with fighting skills. I'm sure you haven't forgotten your family traditions - you might as well make use of them.'

With that, he left, drawing the curtain closed behind him. Nate watched the fabric settle and stayed staring at it. He picked up his shirt and pulled it on, buttoning it up over his scars. Pressing his hand to his belly, he felt the slight movement beneath his abdominal muscles, just above his belly button, as if part of his intestine was shifting position.

'It seems they refuse to be forgotten,' he muttered. 'No matter how hard I try.'

II

A REFUGE FOR ESCAPED SLAVES



THE *SCAFELL* REACHED Boston on the morning of the fourth day. Nate had spent much of that time in troubled sleep, memories and dreams mingling in a sickening stew. He tossed and thrashed, trying to push away images of Tatiana, his beloved sister, and Daisy, whom he missed more than he would ever have believed. And Gerald. Goddamned Gerald. Only sometimes would Nate dream of the son he had left behind in Ireland. He longed for home and burned with shame at the way he had deserted those who needed him most. But he could not go back. The terrible visions that had driven him away to Africa had awakened something in him that he could never bring home. He moaned in his sleep, clawing for unconsciousness, but then he would wake screaming at the memories of his last view of his brother Berto's face.

Disembarking from the Navy vessel, Nate thanked the captain and took his leave, climbing down into the longboat that would take him to shore. Dempsey went with him, but the two men did not speak to each other or to the sailors who rowed them to the dockside. Nate shook hands with them, stepped out of the boat and trotted up the stone

steps. His body swayed unnaturally as his sea legs struggled to walk on solid ground for the first time in months. He hurried along the docks, losing himself in the throng of wagons, horses, fish stalls and the foul-mouthed stevedores loading and unloading the ships.

He didn't feel safe until he had put a few piles of crates, barrels and cargo nets between him and the men from the *Scaffell*. Boston was a good place to hide. With its deep harbour and thriving business community, it had become a centre for trade in rum, fish, salt and tobacco among other goods. The oil from whale blubber was, of course, another major export.

Nate wondered if he could find another whaler with room for one more able seaman, but he quickly dismissed the idea. The family had dogged him this far and clearly would not give up until he was found. If they were sending whole ships after him, going to sea again would not help. He had to make himself scarce.

Perhaps he should have told the Navy men that Nathaniel Wildenstern had gone down with the *Odin*, but that would have meant admitting he'd known the man. As the last link to the missing man, Jim Hawkins would have been subject to an uncomfortable amount of attention. Somebody had traced him to the *Odin's* crew, so that meant someone in Boston could identify him. He needed to get out of the city.

The captain had given him fifteen dollars to tide him over when he went ashore. Not far off the docks, on a street of tall, attractive red-brick buildings, Nate found an eating place where he treated himself to a large breakfast of gammon steak, eggs and pancakes with maple syrup.

At the next table, some Creole blacks were arguing in French about something, ending the argument with a joke and booming laughter. It was strange to sit in an American city and have black people sharing the same space, eating the same food as white folk. Boston had become a refuge

for escaped slaves, and with the Civil War between North and South in full swing, slave-catchers from the plantations in the southern states had better things to be doing than searching a hostile city for their quarry.

Nate wondered how many of these people were truly free and how many were fugitives like himself. No, he thought - not like me. I was one of the slave-drivers, not one of the slaves.

He finished his food and left, heading into the city, making sure to take a winding route. Not long after he'd started walking, a small tan and white basset hound came up to him with its tail wagging and he made the mistake of scratching it behind the ears. The dog gave a joyous bark and ran in circles around him. It then proceeded to follow him down the street, delighted with its new best friend. Nate snapped at it a few times in exasperation, but it forgave him for this on the grounds that they were just getting to know each other, and kept trailing him. Nate sighed and walked on, doing his best to ignore the animal.

He walked the day away. His route took him through some of the less salubrious parts of town. A dull morning brightened slowly into a sunnier afternoon, the sun's momentum seeming too much for it as it tumbled down towards evening. Nate took his time, mixing with the growing crowds as he meandered through the muddy streets, past the grog-shops and dancing houses, the oyster cellars, pubs and bawdy-houses. He kept stopping to check behind him, gazing into windows, perusing the wares of various stalls, or simply fixing his bootlaces. Despite his efforts to blend in here, to look at ease, he was constantly alert, his senses heightened. His teeth were pressed together, but his limbs were loose and ready to react at a moment's notice. The hound was never far away. But it was the dog's owner who had Nate's nerves on edge.

Somebody was following him, and he doubted that it was a representative of Her Majesty's Royal Navy. For one

thing, they were too good at staying out of sight. And the dog made Nate very easy to spot. It was a clever trick, or would be until he decided to get rid of the dog. But for the moment he would let it serve its purpose.

The Irish had taken over in Boston much as they invaded everywhere else they settled; moving in with a good-natured work ethic and then breeding like rabbits until they ruled by sheer weight of numbers. Nate heard the accents all around him; mixed in with the Boston drawl, there were traces of Galway, Limerick, Kerry, the sing-song voices bringing on a sudden wave of homesickness. But he also passed signs advertising accommodation with the infamous 'NINA', or 'No Irish Need Apply'.

He walked through Half Moon Place, among shacks and buildings that seemed to be competing with each other to see which could slump in the most ungainly fashion. Street urchins played with stray dogs in the maze of laneways, amused themselves at the expense of passers-by, and picked the occasional pocket. This was one of the oldest parts of town, yet still a mere infant compared to places like Dublin or Cork in the Old Country. Mills and factories had sprung up in the city with the onward charge of the Industrial Revolution, the smoke of the business boom rising from a hundred tall chimneys. Science was beginning to render skilled humans obsolete, and the city had been introduced to the concept of smog.

After hours of what seemed like aimless wandering, Nate arrived in Charlestown. The basset hound was flagging, its short legs struggling to keep up with Nate's long strides. It still wagged its tail whenever it found Nate looking down at it, but while its spirit was willing, its body was weak. It panted at high speed, its unfeasibly long tongue almost dragging on the ground. Nate took in his surroundings, noting the heights of the roofs on the buildings above him. Then he suddenly darted down a narrow alleyway and vaulted over the six-foot-high wall at