

## CHAPTER ONE

### Dead Man's Baggage

*The West Indies*

*On the island of Antigua, in the capital St. John's Town*

*During the Glorious Golden Age of Magic, Piracy and Sail*

The attack, when it came, was swift as a lick of lightning from a clear summer's sky and equally unexpected.

Black Harry Rye reeled down a dark alleyway, trying without much success to avoid splashing through reeking pools of filth or stepping on dog or cat or bloated rat carcasses. He passed three men leading a bleating goat on a tether. The animal's glossy hide was marked with the sacrificial symbol of Belial. Harry brushed off a scrawny whore who clutched at his arm; the woman's glassy gaze spoke of the pox. Her curses followed him as he continued down the alley. His belly was full of good mutton and bad ale; the night was humid but tolerably so, though sweat still soaked his shirt and breeches, and stung the galls in his armpits to irritated fire. He found a flea in his beard and cracked it between his thumbnails, taking some satisfaction in the tiny death.

The next moment, he was pinned against a wall with a hard arm across his throat and eight inches of steel glittering not a breath away from his wide-open eyes.

"Well, well, well," his attacker said in a low growl, "if it ain't Black Harry himself, piss-proud and just as useless. Good e'en, Harry."

"What...what do you want?" Harry was unable to focus on the person holding the knife; his vision was filled with quicksilver trails of light glinting from razor sharp edges. He reached down to the hilt of his cutlass, then let out a hiss when the knife jabbed forward and pricked the side of his nose, perilously close to his eye. "Damnation!"

"Keep your ass at anchor, m'lad, or I'll carve out those peepers in a trice!"

Harry was suddenly aware of a warm trickle of blood on his whiskered cheek. A sour belch bubbled up from his stomach, threatening to cast up his dinner. He swallowed thickly past the lump in his throat that felt as big, heavy and complicated as a Monkey's Fist knot. "Easy now, yer lordship," he said. "I ain't the fighting sort."

"Not even when you sailed with Tom Carew on the *Deceiver*?"

Startled, Harry bit back an oath. The heat of another body pressed close to his own; an uneasy silence bloomed between them, but he could feel the unspoken threat from his attacker, the faint vibration of violence held on a fraying leash. He shuffled nervously, coughed, spat a glob of sputum on the ground and said, "I don't quite take yer meaning. Don't know no Carew. Never heard o' *Deceiver*. You've got the wrong fellow, yer lordship."

"I think you know. I think you're hiding something." The dagger withdrew and the person stepped away from him, a shadowy figure abruptly revealed in a pool of lambent silver light as clouds scudded away from the horned witch's moon.

"By the sweet bleedin' Christ!" Harry blurted in surprise. *A woman!*

*She was lean and lanky, about equal to Black Harry's height; her hair was concealed beneath a blue kerchief and a tricorne hat. Her eyes were gray, cold and bright as polished steel. A gunpowder tattoo curved over one cheek like a smudge from a dirty thumb. Five gold rings dangled from her earlobe. She grinned as recognition dawned. A weight settled in Harry's chest, and ice invaded his bowels.*

"*Bess O'Bedlam!*" Harry felt his testicles trying to crawl into his body cavity. Fresh sweat broke out over his body, and with it came the bitter stench of fear. "*By the sweet bleedin' Christ!*" he repeated, and spat on the ground again to ward off bad luck.

"*None other.*" Bess shrugged open her coat to show a cutlass thrust through her wide leather belt, as well as the pair of flintlock pistols she wore in a red ribbon sling looped over her shoulders. A dagger rode in the top of each sea boot. "*Have you naught to tell me of Carew's Deceiver?*" she asked, fingering the butt of a flintlock with her free hand.

"Nobbut a sea tale, captain! I swear on me mother's grave!"

Bess snorted. "Aye, as if I'd believe an oath from a motherless dog like you! I know you sailed with Fancy Carew, m'lad. It's been nigh onto twenty-five years since the *Deceiver* was swallowed whole by the sea, all hands lost or so they say, but here I stand talking today to a dead man, and if he don't sing me a pretty song, he'll be dead in truth. No mistake, Harry, you're worm's meat unless you tell me what I want to know. Mayhap I'll leave you livin' and a bit richer for your trouble if you please me with your warblin'."

Harry shook his head. Terror made his mouth dry but he ground out, "I know naught, captain. I never served with Carew."

"Lying's a mortal sin."

"I know naught!" Harry rolled his eyes from side to side, but there was no escape. Two tough-looking men materialized in the alley and for a moment he thought his salvation might be at hand. If he called on them to aid an old tar against this harpy, he might have a chance... Then the men muttered low greetings to Bess, and Harry felt as though he had been struck a blow in the cods. All the air rushed out of his lungs and he gasped weakly, clutching the wall for support as his knees wobbled, threatening to spill him over.

"Speak to me, Harry." Bess shoved her knife back into its sheath. With blood-chilling nonchalance, as though she had all the time in the world, she removed a cheroot from the pocket of her crimson waistcoat; a gesture from her sent one of the men to the end of the alley, where the narrow passage between a warehouse and a warehouse met the main thoroughfare. Cresset torches burned there, a flickering of dirty orange against the gloom. He returned with a bit of flaming kindling, which she used to light the cheroot.

Puffing smoke idly, Bess said, "I'll make this simple for you, Harry m'lad. You've two choices. Tell me about the *Deceiver* – no lies, no fiddle-faddle, no flummery – and I'll cut you into the game. Give you a full share of the treasure and an easy berth on my ship. Damnation, man, I'll even give you a thousand *livres* as good faith right now, free and clear. If you say no, I'm going to use this cheroot and take out your eye; if you keep your bone box shut, I'll do t'other one. Not much use to be got from a blind sailor, Harry. You'll be beggin' for your supper till they roll you into a pauper's grave."

Harry swallowed hard. He braced himself against the wall and debated taking to his heels. As though they could read his mind, the other two men took up flanking positions. Harry wilted. He was too fat to outrun them, too old to fight and win his freedom. Internal ice melted as a surge of burning liquid in his bowels made him clench his buttocks together; he strove to control himself, lest he bewray his breeches and complete his humiliation.

"What's it to be, eh?" Bess removed the cheroot from her mouth, knocked off the feathery white ash, and examined the glowing crimson tip. "You know, a man's peepers make a noise when you take somethin' hot to them. Sounds somewhat like steppin' on a ripe grape; soft and liquid as a love-struck woman's sigh." She watched him tremble. A humorless grin stretched across her face, deepening the creases that fanned out from the corners of her eyes.

"Oh, you'll tell me everything in time," Bess continued in an almost seductive purr. "Why not save yourself the trouble? Your crewmates are dead, naught but empty bones surging with the tide. No one's left who'll begrudge you sharing the secret. This is just betwixt me n' thee, Harry Rye. Carew's lying snug in Abraham's bosom. He don't care about the treasure, he don't care if you break faith with him. Such things ain't no concern to any but the livin'. Telling me won't do you no harm. Where's the *Deceiver*? Where does she lie? Where's the reef that gutted her belly and left her foundering?"

Harry was mesmerized. His tongue flicked out to soothe dry lips. "I swore 'n oath!" he said, panting. "Never tell or 'tis the black spot for certain."

"None need ever know," Bess said coaxingly.

His guts roiled and he thought he might vomit. A dull thudding ache in his chest, which Harry had noticed earlier that evening, now exploded into fiery agony. Pain rippled down his left arm. Demons were excavating between his ribs; each pickaxe blow seemed to strike directly upon his convulsing heart. He cried out, "Cap'n!" and fell to his knees. A bloody haze obscured his vision, the edges tinged with hungry shadows.

"*Merde!*" Bess dropped the cheroot and knelt down beside the stricken man. "Talk to me, Harry! I don't reckon you're a good Christian, but confession's good for the soul!"

Harry tried to speak but something was squeezing his lungs; he could not catch his breath. It felt as though his bones were cracking and splintering under the intolerable pressure. Excruciating torment also squeezed his heart until he thought it was going to burst. He retched, bringing up a gush of barely digested mutton and bile that poured from his mouth and nose, and splashed on the cobblestones. Harry panted, toppling over sideways.

“By God, you’ll not die on me yet,” Bess growled, grasping him by the coat collar. “Where’s the *Deceiver*, Harry? Tell me, damn you!”

Harry’s lips drew back from his teeth in a rictus. “F-F-Fiddler’s...Green,” he stammered.

Bess frowned. Fiddler’s Green was a mythical paradise where sailors went after they died, to carouse forever with women and wine. Harry Rye was telling her in so many words to kiss his arse and dance to the Devil’s tune.

“A curse upon you,” she spat in bitter disappointment, rising to her feet. “You’ve cheated me for the moment, Harry Rye, but when I see you in hell, I’ll ask the Old Horned One to give you a clap of brimstone to remember me by.”

The man’s body stiffened. His fingers curled, claw-like, as his heels beat a tattoo upon the ground. He scabbled at his waistcoat. His face was engorged, almost purple with the force of his distress. A long exhalation rattled in his throat. His eyes had rolled up, showing a crescent slice of blood-veined whites behind the drooping lids. Harry was beyond threats or curses.

A crewman asked, “Shall I fetch a gallipot, Cap’n?”

“He’s past the ’pothecary’s help. I reckon not even a miracle will save his worthless life, and I wouldn’t waste a healer’s charms on his like.” Bess squatted once more, her attention attracted by something shining between the dying man’s fingers. It looked like a silver coin; on reflex, she took it, tucked the object into her coat pocket, and jerked her head at her two companions. “Let’s go. There’s naught for us here.”

They left him alone in the alley. His fingers twitched and went still. Dark clouds boiled across the moon once more. Mercifully, Black Harry Rye was dead before the stray dogs, and hungry cats and rats found his corpse and made a midnight feast.

Bess O’Bedlam, known to many in the Caribbean as the Water Witch, stalked through the streets of St. John’s Town in a towering fury. The long full skirts of her black satin frock coat flared out around her legs as she moved stiffly but purposefully in the direction of the harbor. The two crewmen followed her without comment. They knew better than to interrupt their captain when she was angry. Bess’ temper was as legendary as her penchant for trouble.

Suddenly, she paused. Something had caught her attention – a little tavern that was hardly more than a collection of boards lashed together, crammed between two other buildings, and leaning tipsily to one side. There were no windows, just wide cracks between the boards and a doorway covered by a ragged blanket. It looked slatternly and foul, thoroughly unsavory, and ready to collapse at the slightest shock.

A wooden signboard hung by a rope over the doorway. There was no writing on it – most sailors were illiterate, finding little use for letters – but someone had daubed the sign with dirty green paint and a crudely drawn violin. *Fiddler’s Green*, Bess thought, eyeing the tavern with speculation. *Could it be a trap?* Absently, her short-trimmed nails drummed on the scabbard of her cutlass.

After a few moments of thought, she turned to her crewmen. “Get ye back to the *Mad Maudlin*,” she ordered, “and tell Lovelock to wait for my return. If I ain’t come by then, he’s to get her away from Antigua and turn command over to Mister Dunn.”

“Aye-aye, Cap’n,” one of the men said. His companion looked as though he might protest, but a sharp glare from Bess made him reconsider. He shrugged and tugged his forelock. The sailors walked away without a backward glance.

Bess stood still for a while, ignoring the streams of people who passed by her. She was jostled once; well-honed reflexes caused her hand to shoot out, grabbing the cutpurse’s thumb and snapping the bone with a practiced twist of her wrist. The would-be thief cursed hoarsely and disappeared into the crowd. No one else approached her too closely; she had shown that she was predator, not prey, and therefore to be avoided.

While she examined the tavern, a sailor was forcibly ejected out of the building by unseen hands. The man seemed hopelessly drunk; he reeled, stumbled, then slipped into a puddle of sewage, falling with a noisome splash. The hapless sailor was immediately set upon by a pack of child thieves who stripped him of valuables in a trice, leaving him naked and unconscious, or possibly dead. Shortly afterwards, a harlot in a tattered Madras cotton dress went inside the place, followed by a juggler whose glass balls were filled with dull red witch-fire, the occult-born flames that burned without burning.

At last, sensing nothing overtly suspicious that might be a trap, but still on her guard, Bess settled her shoulders and entered the Fiddler’s Green. The tavern was dark, smoky and filthy, and reeked of stale beer,

unwashed bodies and blood – old blood as well as more recently spilled. Every surface was covered with an oily film; the blackened ceiling beams fairly dripped with soot. Sand crunched underfoot. The tables and benches were cheap and badly constructed of scrap ship boards, seemingly ready to fall apart at a sneeze. A few spluttering candles in cracked dishes did little to dispel the gloom. It was the sort of place where a drowned rat or two in the ale barrels was thought to add a certain piquancy.

The customers matched the ambience; they were rough-faced and ragged, true scoundrels who respected nothing but strength and brute cunning. The men reminded Bess of a pack of hungry dogs – fearless and vicious unless confronted by someone who proved to be stronger and meaner. Then they crawled on their bellies, pretended to submit and waited for the opportunity to tear out the stronger one's throat. There was a hum of tension in the air, prickling her skin like the tingle of nearby lightning. A sharp pain lanced through her thumbs. She knew what the warning portended; Bess was no stranger to savagery.

She eased the side of her frock coat back over her cutlass hilt, freeing the blade for action. Bess had visited this sort of establishment before. It was common sense to keep your weapon loose in its sheath, and your money next to your skin. She glanced around the dingy room, taking particular note of a number of card and dice games. If the gamblers had their knives stuck into the table tops – a sign of imminent bloodshed – it would be prudent to leave. She could always return later with a few of her own bully boys. Bess would back *Mad Maudlin's* crew against this scurvy lot anytime, but it looked like blades were sheathed, meaning the games were relatively honest.

A dreadlocked man in breeches and a dirty shirt – a cargo handler, judging from the boathook hanging on his belt – spied her in the doorway and made a coarse jest. The room erupted into sniggers. At first glance, Bess was definitely not the tavern's average customer. She was conscious of intense scrutiny by dozens of eyes as the patrons judged her appearance.

The oversized cuffs, lapels and collar of her black satin frock coat were decorated with swirls of flat gold braid. Fine lace spilled over her wrists, and cascaded down the bosom of her white linen shirt. Her hip-length waistcoat of cerise silk was embroidered with acanthus leaves in olive green, which matched her knee-length breeches; a thick, tooled leather belt supported the scabbard of her cutlass. A Burmese ruby ring glittered on her index finger, looking like a drop of petrified blood set in gold. From the top of her tricorne hat to the tips of her sea boots, Bess O'Bedlam cut a magnificent, even foppish, figure.

Because her breasts were small, her body lean and tall, she was usually mistaken for a young man, an impression she preferred not to correct unless it became necessary. Not everyone recognized the infamous pirate captain on sight, despite the *Water Witch's* formidable reputation in her own corner of the world. Black Harry Rye's instant identification was the exception, since common seafarer's gossip held Bess O'Bedlam to be ten feet high at least, with horns on her forehead, a set of clashing fangs between her legs and fireballs shooting from her arse. The reality might be ludicrously commonplace in comparison, but the real woman was more dangerous than any tale-teller's fantasy.

"Hey, bum boy!" a drunken wit called out, "Did you lose your way? Or are you looking for a real man to pry open that dainty bung-hole of yours and fill it full o' cream?" There was a great deal of laughter at this sally, but some of the other patrons kept quiet, watching to see how Bess would respond.

Bess bared her teeth in a snarl. "That's a damnable boast for a man who's lost his pizzle to the pox. Did you get the French disease from a quayside doxy, or was it your mother gave you the rot, you damned goose-witted whore's son?"

Infuriated, the man let out a bellow and leaped to his feet, nearly upsetting the table. His mates, spotting the flintlocks beneath Bess' coat, tried to make him sit down. He pulled away, too drunk for sense, and came at Bess swinging a broken chair leg.

Bess ducked the awkwardly aimed blow, drew back her leg, and kicked the man full in the face. He fell to the floor with a bone-rattling thump, spitting teeth and blood. She squatted and drew one of her flintlocks in a swift, fluid motion. Before he had time to defend himself, she had the barrel of the pistol pressed against his forehead. Bess cocked the doghead with her thumb. The twin clicks sounded ominous in the otherwise silent room.

"Easy, lad," she said as he blinked at her. His mouth was already swelling from the blow she had dealt him; blood smeared his lips and chin. "We've no real quarrel and 'tis too fine a night for killin' out of hand." She rose, keeping the flintlock aimed steadily at the man's face. "I'm feeling fairly peaceable, so you and your mates can pay up and get out, and I'll not stop you. Otherwise, I'll put a lead ball in your brainpan. S'trewh, by thunder, and you can make of it what you will."

He mumbled something unflattering and blasphemous, his expression sullen. Bess' smile grew wider. "Do you think your mates'll help you?" She shot a glance at the other patrons. Most had gone back to their

drinking and gambling. The man's friends were watching the tableau but did not seem anxious to get involved. One by one, they threw a few small coins on the table and slunk out of the tavern.

Bess gestured with the pistol. "On your feet and find the door, quick, afore I change my mind!" she snapped.

He scrambled to his feet and fled, blood dribbling down the front of his shirt.

The landlord, a big-bellied, dusky-skinned man whose apron was covered in dubious stains, put away the spiked club he had retrieved from behind the bar at the first sign of trouble. Bess returned her flintlock to its sling beneath her coat and sauntered over to him. After bidding the landlord a polite good evening, she dipped into her pocket and slapped a Spanish doubloon down on the scarred counter. His hand flickered and the doubloon disappeared. Bess nodded, impressed by his speed.

"What will ye, m'lord?" the landlord asked. His voice was a rasping croak – no doubt the result of whatever had caused the thick scar on his throat—and his gaze was steady, cold and calculating. "Ain't got no wine, nor hock nor other fancy stuff. Only beer n' ale, rum n' arrack." He suddenly leered; the expression did not suit his weather-seamed face. "Less'n you wants a trip to Gropecunt Lane. I've got tail, m'lord, the likes of which you won't find outside the heathen Orient! Just sit yerself in the corner and I'll send over one o' me best doxies. Ol' Lizzy knows what the gentlemen likes. Hoy, Liz!"

"None o' that," Bess answered, shrugging away the caress of a blowsy, near toothless woman who had come at the landlord's call. She paid no heed to the harlot's hissed insult; instead, she gave Lizzy a flat stare that sent her scurrying away. Leaning an elbow on the bar, Bess beckoned the landlord closer. He hesitated, then complied.

"Black Harry Rye," she half-whispered, certain that no one could hear them over the buzz of conversation. "He sent me here."

The landlord looked startled. He glanced from left to right, and put his hands flat down on the counter. "Is that so, m'lord?" he asked warily.

"Aye, 'tis so," Bess replied, allowing some of her exasperation to show. "Well? Have you aught to say about that, or shall we stand here all evening, dumb as fish?"

"Perchance." The landlord considered her for a moment and finally shrugged. "Black Harry was here all right. He had some baggage with 'im."

Bess' interest was piqued. "Baggage?" she asked casually, although her heart beat a little faster. This could be it. The end of her long quest seemed within reach, and excitement sang through her veins.

"Aye." The landlord pushed a leather jack of ale towards her. When Bess did not touch it, he lifted it to his own lips and took a long swallow.

Bess had to restrain herself from punching the man, or at least giving him a good shake. If he knew how badly she needed the information, he might turn coy. Her instincts told her that trying to torture it out of him would be a prolonged and possibly fruitless endeavor. He was no Harry Rye, a tired old man who could be bullied to the breaking point. This fat fellow in his food-stained apron would hold out long after she was weary. The more she pushed him, the more stubborn he would become; besides, he probably had supporters among the snarling crowd of cutthroats that patronized his tavern.

Accordingly, she waited, keeping her face expressionless by force of will, until he relented and continued, "This is how 'tis, m'lord, and the Devil take me if I lie. Black Harry's credit ain't no good, not in St. John's Town. Not in the whole o' the godforsaken West Indies. He pays cash or kind, slap bang or nothing."

The landlord took another drink; a thin stream of ale spilled down his shirt. He wiped the wet spot carelessly with his palm. "So, Harry comes in tonight. He's got a fistful o' gold, m'lord. Gold." The man repeated the word reverently. "It weren't too long afore a sharper seen Harry's flash and gulled him into cards. Ye knows, m'lord, that poor Harry is befuddled most o' the time so that he can't tell his arse from his elbow. He lost the gold to the sharper – who was fast away soon as he had it, and no man the wiser – and Harry still owed me for the night's carouse. He went home to fetch more coin, so I'm keepin' his baggage till he pays the bill. 'Tis my right to settle a debt in such-like fashion."

"Harry won't be coming back tonight," Bess said. "He sent me to pay his bill. How much does the old sea-dog owe?"

"Well, that's mighty kind of yer lordship." The landlord's forehead crinkled; his look of cunning calculation increased. "I reckon he owed me...fifty shillings all told."

Bess rolled her eyes in disbelief. "Do I look like an addle pate fresh off the boat from Cádiz? I could buy this louse haven for half as much, free n' clear."

“Ah, but Harry’s a good soul. Likes his mates jolly, he does. Bought the whole house a few rounds o’ my best ale. Played the beast with two backs in Gropecunt Lane – twice. Then there’s the damages, o’ course. Damages is most costly.”

“Damages?” Bess made a show of looking around. “A fire would do the place a world of good. Anythin’ less is an improvement.”

“I s’pose I could take thirty-five. No less,” the landlord said, crossing beefy arms over his chest. “Bein’ as how yer a great lordship who ain’t but doing a kindness for a friend.”

“Ten is all I’ll offer, master grumbleguts. Not a ha’penny more.” Bess took out her purse, counted the correct number of coins, and laid them on the counter. The landlord hesitated, and she added, “Take it. You’ve had a good doubloon from me thus far, more’n enough to pay for a whole night’s carouse.”

Still, the man seemed unwilling to accept the lesser fee. Greed had gotten the better of him. She could read that clearly on his face. She also noticed one of his hands creeping under the counter. “Pick up that cash and give me the baggage, or I’ll gut you like a herring where you stand,” she said, searing him with a cold glare. Her hand slapped against the hilt of her cutlass, and her muscles coiled, preparing to draw and strike.

The landlord froze in place. Slowly, he brought his hand back into sight, scooped up the coins, and gave her an unfriendly look. “Ye tells Black Harry, when you sees him, that he ain’t welcome in my place no more,” he said. “And if I sees yer poxy face again, m’lord cock o’ the company, I’ll push yer teeth out yer arse with one good punch.”

“The baggage?” Bess lifted a brow, not at all affected by his threat.

The landlord came around the counter and stumped towards the back of the tavern. Reaching a door cobbled together from planks and stuck in a warped frame, he produced a key from his apron pocket and unlocked it. He shoved the door open with a foot and said, “Take yer damned baggage n’ get ye gone.”

He used his big belly to shove Bess aside as he returned to his place behind the counter.

Carefully, Bess entered the room, if it could be called that. It was a sort of cobbled-together lean-to tacked onto the back of the Fiddler’s Green. Mildewed tarpaulins, propped up with more planks, served as walls and roof. The floor was simply the cobblestones of the alley behind the tavern. A sweet, stomach-churning stench permeated the atmosphere. She closed the door. It was oppressively dark, but Bess located a candle stub in a bracket on the doorframe, along with flint and steel. It took her only a moment to strike a light.

What she saw made her gasp in astonishment.

Black Harry Rye’s “baggage” was a woman.