

Chapter 1



BOSTON
JUNE 1726

I don't know what made me determined to go to the hanging.

I'd always made a point of avoiding them. I resisted the entreaties of my friends who wanted to be in amongst the throngs of onlookers, ears pricked for the last words and the pious advice of the soon-to-be-damned.

Of course, I'd always been curious. You cannot help but wonder about the face of one condemned. To see his carriage toward the crowd, and himself. To feel the swelling cheers and cries of all the townsfolk, to hear the crack of the felon's neck snapped like a chicken's.

I wondered if their eyes were open or closed when their moment came. What happens, in the instant in between being a living, breathing creature, trembling with needs and wants and fears, and being an empty sack of flesh and bone? Is it the same for an old woman alone in her bed with the covers pulled up tight as it is for a man mounting the scaffold before God and everyone? Does an unearthly light of heaven attained shine upon the greasy strings of their hair if they have confessed and repented? Everyone repents at the end. Or so I've been told.

I'd heard the moment of public death described often enough, usually by someone with a hand around a glass. But I had always been of too

delicate a nature to see for myself. I didn't like to drown kittens or stomp tremble-whiskered mice and, as often as not, found a way to avoid such grim chores on the occasion Mrs. Tomlinson chose to impose them on me. I even crossed the street from dogs lying dead in the gutter.

But something about William Fly was different. I made up my mind that I would go.

Summer wears long on the Boston wharves, with early sunrise and late nightfall dragging its feet to deliver our relief. And so, the afternoon was stifling in Ship Tavern when I first heard the name of William Fly. The ordinary was generally tolerably cool in summer, being a dim cavern of rooms built of ancient brick, squatting like a naiad's grotto for almost a hundred years at the foot of Clark's Wharf. Ship Tavern stands close enough to the harbor waters that a brig can moor nearly at the lip of our door. Well situated to swallow up the passing seamen as they stumble ashore, land-sick and looking for all the things sailors look for when they have been long at sea. But that June day the sun shone especially heavy, bleaching the color out of the air and leaving us all wilted and damp. Inside, the usually cool hollow of the larger dining room had warmed by degrees until it felt like the inside of a beehive oven. The sand on the floor was hot underfoot. The front door stood propped open to catch any whisper of a passing breeze, but the water in Boston Harbor was as flat and slick as molten glass.

I was sitting on an old apple barrel outside, leaning on the brick wall of my home and place of employ, my skirts knotted up to my shins to get some air on my bare and aching feet. I should have been getting back inside to stoke something, or serve something, or carve something, or scour something. Inside the tavern a few men lazed indolently about, looking into their cups, waiting for the day to end. No one was calling my name. Mrs. Tomlinson was I knew not where. As I gazed up the narrow length of Fish Street, I spied not a living soul, save the odd gull perched on a piling or tabby cat slithering amongst coils of rope in search of rats. My heels bumped on the hollow barrel.

I packed a small wad of tobacco and hemp into the slender clay pipe someone had left behind in one of the rooms, sparked it with a few sucks

of my cheeks, and settled back to stare over the water, smoke coiling from my lower lip up into my nostrils. Clark's Wharf is nearly as long as Long Wharf, but older. Half a dozen snags and brigs and a couple of little schooners and sloops rubbed their hulls against the pilings, their lines and rigging creaking. Sails all furled and put away. No one was about. No bent-over boys scrubbing any decks or barefoot figures climbing rigging silhouetted by the sun. Even the gulls were quiet. The water shimmered away to the horizon, low ridges of the harbor islands rising through the orange and yellow summer haze.

I closed my eyes and wished for a ripe apple.

"Cut his hand off," I heard someone say softly. So softly, it might have been spoken in my mind.

I opened my eyes but saw no one.

"Off! With what?" another voice said, in an accent that hinted at time in Jamaica. So, not inside my head after all.

I got off the apple barrel, ears straining to listen. The voices hadn't come from inside the tavern. Fish Street was as abandoned as it would be after the Rapture.

"Broadaxe," said the first voice, who was from somewhere that wasn't Boston. "As he clung to the mainsheet hanging over the side."

Someone laughed merrily.

I could hear them clear as a church bell. But where were they?

Presently I discerned the shape of a small rowboat emerging from the haze, its oars dipping and rising in circles. The rowboat contained two boys about my own age, seventeen or so, not more than twenty, in sun-whitened shirts and breeches. The one pulling on the oars wore a checked kerchief over his head to keep the sweat from his eyes. His companion, the Jamaican, wore his knotted around his neck, his hair in tidy twists all over his head. They edged close to the nearest moored brig, and the boy with his back to me leaned on an oar to clear the stern.

I could have gone to help them tie up, but it was too hot. Instead, I sat back on the barrel and drew on my new pipe.

"That's one way to discharge your sailing master," the Jamaican said with gravity. "Handless into the deep. One o'clock in the morning."

"I knew that John Green," his mate, the not-Bostonian, continued. "Their captain. At Port Royal."

The rowboat bumped up to the piling almost exactly below my idle feet, grating against the barnacles. The not-Bostonian sprang ashore with a line in his hand and made it fast. I tried to make a ring with my smoke to watch them through, but it came out a cloud.

"And?" the Jamaican said as he lifted himself out of the rowboat, landing on his hands and feet on the wharf like a cat.

"And if I could, I'd have handed William Fly the axe myself," said the not-Bostonian. "Can we get something to eat?"

This last remark was apparently directed at myself. I decided that if I wasn't actually addressed, I needn't respond. This boy was pale and reddish, his cheeks spotted pink with the heat, and he mopped his streaming face with his kerchief and rerolled a sleeve while I ignored him.

"He beg?" the Jamaican asked, paying me no heed. Sweat beaded on his whiskerless upper lip. They were both standing close enough to smell.

"They'd let him choose, they said. Would he leap like a brave fellow, or would he be tossed overboard like the sneaking rascal he was? And he cried, 'For the Lord's sake, boatswain, don't throw me overboard!'" the not-Bostonian mimicked, clasping his hands beneath his chin, eyes beseeching imaginary tormentors. "'For if you do, you throw me into hell immediately!'"

The two boys dissolved in laughter and through gasps and tears the not-Bostonian added, "And Fly, Fly said, 'D—n you! Since he's so devilish Godly, we'll give him time to say his prayers and I'll be parson. Now say after me, Lord have mercy on my soul!' And then the people chucked him over!"

"Ah! That would've been a sight to see!" his mate clapped his hands in delight. Turning to me he added, "Here, now, the boy asked you a question. We want to eat!"

I swiveled my eyes over to the two of them, letting my gaze rest upon their faces long enough for them to feel that they were interrupting my idle afternoon. If they felt any remorse at troubling me, they surely didn't show it.

I unfolded myself from my sentry post, knocked the ashes out of my pipe, and slid it into my pocket.

“Oh certainly, your Lordships,” I said, joking as was my wont with the cabin boys who came my way. “Right this way, your Grace.”

I stepped through the open front door not bothering to see if they were following. It never ceases to amaze me that hungry sailors will willingly stop at the first ordinary they see, no matter how many rats might be fattening themselves in the cellar.

“But what of the mate?” the Jamaican boy continued to his friend as they followed me into the largest dining room. He moved with a sailor’s bowlegged gait. Inside the tavern smelled of boiled lemons in rum and roasted chicken grease and burnt wood and tired men.

“Thomas Jenkins?” the other boy said. He was taller but thinner. “Cut at the shoulder with the broadaxe, then flung overboard by the main shrouds.”

“No!” cried the Jamaican, loudly enough that a pickled gentleman in a ripped greatcoat stirred in his sleep across a table.

“He cried like a girl. ‘For the Lord’s sake, fling me a rope!’” mocked the pink-cheeked not-Bostonian. “‘Doctor, doctor! A rope! A rope!’”

I stopped abruptly near the settle by the fireplace and said, “What color’s your money?”

The boys looked surprised to discover that I could speak, as if the fireplace poker or a Windsor chair had offered to knit them up a muffler.

“What’s it to you?” said the not-Bostonian. “You own the tavern now?”

I weighed the risk that these rascals might cut and run with the pleasure such a prank would give me when presented to Mrs. Tomlinson alongside their licked-dry chicken bones and empty cups and decided the rewards were many and the risks were few. It wasn’t especially Christian of me to make a sport of vexing Mrs. Tomlinson. But I was powerless to help myself. Also, I had a running wager with some of the other girls about which of our masters could be cheated worst by our customers before next meeting day. These two rogues would win me a peach and a half.

“Fine,” I said, waving my hand at a table not too far from the door, on which a lone maggot twisted in the streaming afternoon sunlight.

They sat down together to continue their feast of stories. “That William Fly. Turned pyrate,” said the sturdy Jamaican with evident admiration. “Out on his own account and caught just as fast. Poor b—d. But why’d they do it?”

“What do you think?” said his skinny friend. “Bad usage.” They shared a moment of silent mutual understanding.

I was on the point of asking for more details, no doubt shocking them with my ability to not only speak but inquire, when a rum-thickened voice in the other room called, “Hannah! Hannah Misery!” I left them at the table with some bitterness. But as my hands moved thoughtlessly through their labors the rest of that day, cleaning and scrubbing and wiping and pouring, my thoughts lingered on this William Fly and his broadaxe. I started to wonder what it might be like to look upon his face and read it in the dare of freedom.

MY NAME ISN’T Hannah Misery. It’s Hannah Masury. I was born a bit before 1710 in Beverly, I’ve been told, an easy day’s sail or so from Boston, and though I suppose I had brothers and sisters and a mother and father, I couldn’t tell you a thing about them, because I was bound out when I still had milk teeth. I remember a mean little house with a smoking chimney, sleeping in a trundle crowded with hands and feet, and the smell of the ocean in the fog. That’s all. Since then, it’s been Mrs. Tomlinson, her baker’s dozen children, and the bustle and ebb and flow of Ship Tavern. I have friends around the wharves, miscellaneous pups like me, lent and bossed and sometimes fed and clothed, tucked into attics and doorways and kitchens at night and dragged out and scrubbed clean when it’s time to go to meeting. Mrs. Tomlinson might be my dead mother’s cousin. Or perhaps she was her aunt? I don’t remember.

Though I never had any schooling, and cannot read the Bible, Mrs. Tomlinson insists that I go to church on the Sabbath and hear the Word. She says it’s never too late to be redeemed. I know she means to help me. I

do. But indolence is my greatest sin. Sabbath day is supposed to be a day of rest, and church drags on for hours and the beadle whacks us on the head if we fall asleep. And I always fall asleep.

She likes to go to the North meetinghouse, where she can bask in the fame of Reverend Cotton Mather. He drove the witches out of Salem before I was born, a feat as impossible-seeming to me as a man driving fairies out of holes in the ground. But for all Reverend Mather's good works, Satan's power still hangs heavy in Boston, and maybe it hangs heaviest on the wharves. I've glimpsed the Devil myself, a time or two, in his cups at Ship Tavern.

Sabbath day is the ripest chance for gossip and rumor to be confirmed or denied in Boston. So the Sunday after I met the two boys from the rowboat I thought to learn more of this William Fly. The whispering classes had told me he'd been brought ashore in irons and thrown into jail the very day the boys arrived. After tossing their master and mate overboard and claiming the ship *Elizabeth* as their own, they'd rechristened her the *Fame's Revenge*, hoisted the black flag, and gone pyrating off Cape Hatteras. They'd been betrayed by a fisherman they entrusted as their pilot after taking a rich prize off Carolina, who instead of leading them safe to Martha's Vineyard for water took them all the way to Boston and fooled them into surrender. They were all sure to hang. Reverend Mather sought to bring them back to the Lord first. They might even be in church that day, their wrists all bound together, their ashamed heads hanging, heavy under the curious stares and barely concealed whispers of all of us. For once, I was actually excited to go to meeting. I even prettied myself up a bit. Scrubbed my face and arms and made up a cleanish tucker.

You probably want to know what I look like. But what does it matter? I look hungry, is what I look like. Skin and bones. Sunburnt. Rough-footed. I have hair on my head, and it's long, and I wear it in a pigtail down my back, or a braid wound at the nape of my neck, under a kerchief, usually, or sometimes one of Mrs. Tomlinson's discarded linen caps. My face is freckle-stained, like I've been sprinkled with gingerbread batter. My age is hard to tell. I could tell you I was anything from fifteen to twenty-five, and

you might believe me. I have eyes that can see better than passing well. No one has ever called me especially pretty, but then again, I have boys whenever I want them. And I still have all my teeth.

That Sabbath day we were all on alert for the pirates as we gathered on the steps of the North meetinghouse, under the clanging of the church bells. Old North sits only a block away from Ship Tavern, a shabby wooden edifice as dark and stuffy as the houses crowded round about it. There's a new brick North Church, a block farther on, just finished a couple of years ago. Its proud white steeple lords over the entire town, visible as far away as Charles Town and the marshlands, and it has bright arched windows and fresh-painted pews, its fineness befitting a celebrated cleric followed by fame and fortune.

"Here, they're coming!" one of the girls said next to me, and excited fingers clamped onto my elbow.

It was hard to see through all the shoulders and backs and heads, because I am skinny and not tall. I spotted first the profile of a well-fed gentleman in black broadcloth with a fresh white kerchief at his neck and a plain black hat, his lips pressed together in the manner of one who speaks for the Lord. The people parted before him like the Red Sea, pushing back against me, my slight body moving in the current of the crowd. There is something exciting about being within a fingertip's length from such fame. Mrs. Tomlinson always returned from Sabbath meeting with a high color to her cheeks that had little to do, I thought, with whatever hymns might have been sung that day.

The crowd knitted back together and for a time I saw nothing but the hairy inside of an old man's ear, before everyone shifted again and in the gap between two women's necks, I spied a beaten man limping up the church steps. This would be Samuel Cole, William Fly's quartermaster. Neither old nor young, Samuel Cole had creases around his careworn eyes. I'd heard he had a wife somewhere and seven children to feed. The whisperers told me that William Fly had suspected him of mutiny and delivered a hundred lashes to his back, and so Cole hobbled with the grimaces of a man in terrible pain.

The crowd blurred and parted again, affording me a fleet glimpse of

a man hangdogging in Cole's footsteps. This rogue was about forty, with hard blue eyes. He sported the long pigtail of a man who has spent his life at sea, weedy like kelp, with bristly red whiskers. Someone standing behind me informed someone else that this was Henry Greenville. Married too, they said. I couldn't imagine being married to a man like him. Any wife of his would spend her days making sure not to turn her back to the door.

Just behind Henry Greenville staggered a boy about twenty, so stewed in strong drink that even after so many days in Boston jail I could smell him as he passed me by. This would be George Condick, so blind drunk that he hadn't even been able to hold a gun when they took the *Elizabeth*. He served as cook for the pirate company. His nose was a starburst of busted blood vessels, and his eyes were rimmed in red as if he had been crying.

I was borne along in the crush of bodies streaming toward the doors of the meetinghouse, the donging of the steeple bell in my ears. The girls I came with were carried off in the crush, and I couldn't even find Mrs. Tomlinson in the tangle of arms and legs, skirts and chins, and sweating temples touched with gray.

"But where is William Fly?" I asked.

No one bothered to answer me.

"Where's the captain?" I raised my voice. "I would look upon William Fly!"

"Not coming," a pinched-nose matron with a bonneted baby in her arms said to me.

"Not coming!" I exclaimed.

"He refused," she said, as a sweet rope of drool dripped from her baby's lower lip onto my shoulder.

I marveled at this novel idea. He had *refused*.

"But why?" I asked the matron's shoulder as it pressed up against my cheek.

"Said he wouldn't have the mob gaze upon him," she replied.

I was funneled with some other youths of obscure parentage and no prospects along the back wall of the meetinghouse while the quality

elbowed their way to the tidy pews that they paid for. Cole, Greenville, and Condick were maneuvered to a pew near the front, that we might all gaze upon their hanging heads while Reverend Mather read his text and took the measure of their souls.

We were the mob, sitting in judgment upon these hard-used men. I saw the staring, curious faces of men and women I had known to some degree or other for most of my life. At Sabbath meeting, in Ship Tavern, on the wharf, at the market, on the street. The whispering classes know everything that happens in small towns like Boston, and I knew all of these people. Adulterers and liars, some of them. Full of wrathful thoughts they hid under their tidy lace-tipped bonnets and felted hats. Eyes glaring covetously at one another's healthy children, or unburned houses, or bustling businesses, or gold rings. Sabbath-breakers like me, lazy as dogs and loving our sleep. Mouths full of oaths when they thought God wasn't listening. Shirkers of work. Players at dice or cards for money. Secret hearts aflame with lust at the curve of a cheek or the bend of a wrist. In their sober New England eyes, I read all the stolen kisses, pocketed apples, long-nursed resentments, weaknesses, sorrows, and shame that ribboned through their lives, livened on occasion with transient candle flames of joy and pleasure and passion and maybe even grace.

We all stood, we mob, and sang, and then we all sat down—those of us with pews to sit in—and Reverend Mather mounted the pulpit and gazed down with the authority of God upon the lowered heads of the embittered pyrates. George Condick loudly sniffing and wiping his wet nose on a sleeve.

"They die," intoned the famous cleric, beginning the sermon that would entertain us all that Sunday afternoon, and which would echo in our heads for days afterward, "even without wisdom."

But William Fly wasn't there.

William Fly refused.