

## chapter one

# the pirate queen

The vast expanse of Clew Bay mirrors the heavens above. Freckled with countless tiny islands, the bay is embraced by mountains. To the north are Slieve Mór and the Nephin Beg range. The western rampart is Cnoc Mór on Clare Island. On the south side of the bay rises the most magnificent of them all – Patrick’s holy mountain, the great quartzite cone of Croagh Patrick.

This part of Connacht is known as Umhall Uí Mháille, the Territory of the O’Malleys. As Granuaile’s fleet nears Clew Bay, huge flocks of kittiwakes and fulmars are winging toward Clare Island for the night. The birds’ harsh cries mingle with the welcoming shouts of the islanders. Men and women run along the headland to wave to the approaching ships.

Standing tall in the prow of her flagship galley, Granuaile waves in return.

The island’s lookout lights a fire to signal the return of the fleet, and answering fires begin to bloom all around the bay. There is an air of celebration. Granuaile’s arrival

means another successful trading voyage – or perhaps plunder to share. She never comes home empty-handed. For generations the O'Malleys have demanded a fee from any merchant ships that enter their territorial waters. If the captains refuse to pay, their vessels are boarded and their cargo seized.

Most of the fleet will offload at Clare Island. Granuaile's flagship and two other galleys sail on across the bay toward Belclare. Dun Béal an Chláir – the Fort at the Mouth of the Plain – is her father's stronghold. She always takes the choicest goods to him.

The wind has died with the setting sun. Granuaile orders her crews to lower the sails. The men take to their oars, and soon the galleys are skimming forward again.

Long snakes of torchlight wind their way over wooded hills and across grassy meadows. Her people are hurrying to welcome Granuaile home. Her caravel, flying the flag of the white seahorse, is the first to reach the shore. Water hisses and foams on the shingle beach. Crew members call to their waiting families, then vault over the side and come running ashore.

A man on a lathered horse approaches at a thundering gallop. People jump out of his way. He dismounts and waits, as his horse paws at the ground. His pride demands that Granuaile come to him.

He is watching for the tall, strongly built ship's captain with her weather-beaten complexion and mane of heavy, black hair. On shipboard she dresses like a man, in close-fitting woollen trows and a linen shirt. Her feet are

bare to give her a grip on slippery wooden decks. Some might mistake her for a sailor. But when he sees her wading through the surf, Richard Bourke recognises Granuaile immediately. Even knee-deep in foaming water, she carries herself like a queen.

In her arms is a bundle wrapped in a seaman's shirt. As she approaches Richard, the bundle gives a loud cry and waves a tiny fist in the air. Granuaile laughs.

'What is that?' Richard demands to know.

She opens her eyes very wide, looking innocent. 'An infant. Have you never seen one before?'

'I have of course, but where did it come from?'

She waves a casual hand toward her caravel. 'My ship.'

He is trying hard not to lose his temper. He has learned that it is dangerous to lose one's temper with Granuaile – she fights back. 'How did an infant come to be on the ship?' he wants to know.

'Simple enough. I gave birth to him.'

Richard stares at her. 'You?'

'That is what I said.'

He can no longer contain his rage. 'You did not tell me you were expecting a child! You went off to sea where anything might have happened to my son and you did not even tell me! Were you keeping him a secret in order to deceive me?'

Granuaile gives him another innocent stare. 'Did I say this baby is a boy?'

Richard makes a grab for the child. She swings away, easily keeping the infant out of his reach. She is as tall as

Richard and nearly as strong, and her eyes flame with defiance. 'Do not try to seize what is mine!' she says in a ringing voice. 'I remind you that we are divorced.'

Richard is her second husband. They had been married less than a year when Granuaile learned that she was with child. Richard was away at the time. He had left her at Rockfleet Castle while he went to take part in one of the border disputes that were part of Irish life. Already Granuaile had feared the marriage was a mistake. My second mistake, she thought sadly. But this time I am wiser than I was when I wed Donal O'Flaherty.

If Richard came back and found that a child was on the way, he would refuse to let her go to sea any more. He would insist she become a traditional wife, meekly submitting to her husband's wishes, with no life of her own.

But Granuaile had tasted another life. She did not intend to give it up.

When Richard returned she had gone out onto the ramparts of the castle, staying behind the stone parapet so he could not see the thickening of her body. She cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted down to her husband, 'Richard Bourke, I dismiss you!'

Sitting on his horse, tired and dirty, expecting a hot meal and a comfortable bed, he had stared up at his wife with his mouth hanging open.

'You what?!'

'I dismiss you, Richard,' Granuaile had repeated, keeping her voice calm. She must be in control, as she was aboard ship. 'Under Brehon Law I claim this castle as my

marriage portion. You have other strongholds, make one of them your home.'

Brehon Law had governed the Gael long before the coming of Saint Patrick. Although the Irish had converted to Christianity a thousand years before, they continued to respect the old ways. In the wilds of Connacht the Gaelic laws still ruled. Rather than risk an outright confrontation on the issue, the Church turned a blind eye.

At Granuaile's request, she and Richard had been married in the Gaelic style. Brehon Law allowed a woman to own property in her own right. It also permitted a marriage 'for one year certain', to give people a chance to decide if they were suited. At the end of that year either party could end the marriage, simply by saying 'I dismiss you'. The wife could then take back her dowry. Instead of the dowry, Granuaile was claiming Rockfleet, an exceptionally secure stronghold on the north shore of Clew Bay.

Because she and Richard were both Catholics, they had also been married by a priest. The Catholic Church did not recognise divorce. Therefore Granuaile was not really ending the marriage; she was simply informing Richard that he no longer had any control over her. To make her point she had barred the castle's only door against him. A number of her men, well armed, stood guard.

Richard had stared up at her for a long time. Then he rode his horse around the castle, muttering to himself. He dismounted and pounded on the heavy oak door. He made threats.

Granuaile had ignored him.

Finally he got back on his horse.

When she was satisfied that Richard was on his way to his other castle at Burrishoole, Granuaile went to join her fleet. There was work to be done. Clan O'Malley depended on her for support and her first obligation was to them.

Carrying her child under her heart, Granuaile had gone back to sea.

## CHAPTER TWO

# ROCKFLEET

When Granuaile returns to Clew Bay with her infant son, she allows Richard Bourke to accompany them to Rockfleet. She gives orders that he is to be treated like a guest, however, rather than lord of the castle.

Richard is not happy about the arrangement. He stalks through the chambers, growling at his wife and bel-lowing at the servants.

A traditional Norman castle is a vast structure, capable of sheltering scores of nobles and their retainers. Rockfleet Castle is much smaller, a typical, square-shaped stone tower house occupied by one family. It stands at the head of an inlet that opens into Clew Bay. At high tide water laps the foot of the tower. At low tide the lawn is seaweed.

Dark and forbidding, Rockfleet defies both man and the elements. Two corner turrets rise above the parapet on opposite sides. Loopholes, through which guns can be fired, overlook the approaches. High up on the east wall is a peculiar, arched doorway that gives on to empty space.

There is a fifty-foot drop to the rocks below. Using this loading bay, goods are delivered to the top of the castle by means of a pulley.

Rockfleet is guarded by, and supplied from, the sea.

The tower comprises four storeys, with an armoury at ground level. Kitchens and a rectangular banqueting hall made of timber and thatch stand a little distance away. If they catch fire, as they frequently do, they can burn without endangering the main structure.

Within the tower, a spiral stone staircase leads to the great hall at the top. This is the main living area. The bed-chamber is one storey below. Opening off the stairs between the two levels is a tiny garderobe, or indoor privy. The waste pipe runs down through the wall to the foot of the tower. The turn of the tide flushes it clean.

Through the garderobe window one can see Croagh Patrick.

Even in summer, a fire is kept burning in the massive arched fireplace in the great hall. Each storey has its own fireplace. From the outside the tower house looks cold and bleak, but the stone walls absorb the heat and radiate it back into the rooms. When every fireplace is alight at once the building can become too hot for comfort.

The floor of the great hall is made of coloured flagstones. Smoke has stained the painted leather wall hangings, darkening their bright colours. An oaken table in the centre of the room holds an assortment of tankards and several fine silver goblets. A pair of large, shaggy

hounds sprawl beneath the table. Bits of armour and weapons are scattered about the room, as are baskets and a fishing net.

Beside the hearth, Granuaile lounges on a bench padded with sheepskin. She is nursing her little son and pretending to ignore her husband.

‘You barred me from my own castle and hid the fact of my son from me!’ Richard accuses, slamming his fist on the table. ‘Worse yet, you plotted to deceive me while I was away fighting for your benefit.’

‘I acted within the law, there was no deception,’ Granuaile drawls. ‘Nor were you acting for my benefit.’ She turns her gaze toward the flames. The firelight is reflected in her dark eyes. ‘I did not ask you to go floundering around in the rain trying to capture a bog for me, Richard.’

‘Not just a bog, but some good pasture land. I have to enlarge our holdings. I need power, and land is power. Even more than that, I need gold to give to my followers. Without a band of my own warriors how can I ever hope to become The MacWilliam?’

‘That title means nothing to me.’ Bending her head, Granuaile presses her chapped lips to the top of her baby’s downy skull.

Richard says, ‘The MacWilliam is chief of all the Bourkes of Mayo.’

‘I am leader of the O’Malleys of Mayo,’ she counters.

‘But you have no title. A woman cannot be elected to a chieftainship.’

‘I rule my people by land and sea,’ she reminds him. ‘What else would you call me?’

‘What some call you behind your back,’ he says with a snort. ‘She-king.’

He means it to be an insult, but she is not insulted. Lifting her chin, she stares at him from beneath level brows. ‘I am,’ says Granuaile. ‘I *am* a she-king.’

Richard is known as Richard-in-Iron, leader of the Bourkes of Carra, a branch of the large Bourke tribe. The Bourkes were originally called de Burgo. They are descended from Normans who came to Ireland from England three hundred years earlier in the service of an English king. Once they arrived, they liked Ireland so much that they decided to stay.

The land the Bourkes occupy used to be part of O’Malley territory. The O’Malleys did not offer the newcomers much opposition when they first settled on the north shore of Clew Bay. The natives thought there was room enough for a few strangers. Little did they realise that these Normans were but the thin edge of the wedge.

The Normans married Irish women and adopted Irish customs. Yet in some ways they remained like the English who had sent them. More than once, Granuaile had said to her husband, ‘Your kind will never have enough until they have everything.’

Richard sees her baby only as someone to carry on his name and increase his holdings. To Granuaile, Toby is small and vulnerable and dear, an individual in his own

right. She will never allow Richard to have control of her son. Nor is she willing to give her husband the profits from her seafaring. That is the real reason behind the quarrel between them now.

While he blusters and threatens, she holds her baby and waits for the storm to blow over. Others know Richard as a violent man. He has only once tried to use force on Granuaile. On that occasion she hit him in the belly with her doubled fist, hard enough to knock the wind from him. She does not think he will hit her again. But if he does, she is ready.

Granuaile is always ready. On ship or on land, she carries a knife in her belt.

‘You do not sail the seas, Richard,’ she says to him when he finally stops shouting and slumps onto a bench. ‘I do. You do not take the risks. I do. The fleet enables me to support my clan as my father did before me. As a chieftain yourself, surely you understand that is my first duty.’

Granuaile’s father is Dubhdara Ua Máille, The Black Oak of the O’Malleys. He is the chief of the clan. Over the years Dubhdara built up a sea trade extending from Scotland and the North Sea to Spain and Portugal. The Black Oak has only one son, Donal of the Pipes. His mother is not Dubhdara’s wife, however. Besides, Donal has no stomach for the sea. So when Dubhdara grew old, Granuaile took over the O’Malley fleet.

Being a sea captain is a singular occupation for an Irish woman. Some people are shocked, but her clan is very proud of her. She has even extended the trade routes.

She is not about to give her hard-won profits to Richard Bourke to pay for petty squabbles with his kinsmen!

Warfare is the normal condition in Connacht, as it is throughout Ireland. Gaelic clans have always fought over cattle. Gaelic chieftains have always fought to extend their territory. The Normans have readily adopted this way of life because they first came into Ireland as mercenaries themselves.

Yet in spite of constant conflict, Ireland in the sixteenth century is prosperous. Much of the island is covered with great forests of timber. Well-watered grasslands support large herds of cattle. The woods teem with game and the lakes and rivers are full of fish. The Gaelic nobility wear masses of gold jewellery, and even their servants possess ornaments of bronze and iron. People of all classes dine on beef and bacon and buttermilk. The Gael have dominated this land for two thousand years. It is hard to imagine anything changing.

Yet change is coming.

Since the twelfth century, the English have sought without success to conquer Ireland. The Norman mercenaries they have sent have been absorbed into the country. The Anglo-Normans have become, some say, more Irish than the Irish themselves. Now they are called the 'Old English', because a new wave of would-be conquerors has arrived from England.

Elizabeth Tudor, Queen of England, has sent shiploads of warriors and administrators to carve up Ireland. They are known as the 'New English'. They have no

desire to become Irish, and have merely come to plunder the country for their monarch. Meanwhile, in foreign sea-ports, Granuaile has heard tales of a New World beyond the western ocean. The English ruler hopes to seize this New World as well. There is no limit to her greed, it seems.

As Granuaile hugs her small son to her breast, she thinks about that other she-king across the Irish Sea. She feels a chill run up her spine. If Elizabeth succeeds in her dreams of conquest, what effect will that have on Toby's life? On his childhood?

It is less disturbing for Granuaile to recall her own childhood. Gratefully she looks back to the days when she was wild and free.