I STATE OF THE STA

SNEAK PEEK



ONLY

UNCORRECTED PROOF

LORI BENTON

AUTHOR OF MANY SPARROWS



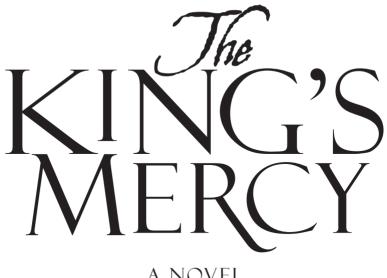
BOOKS BY LORI BENTON

Burning Sky The Pursuit of Tamsen Littlejohn Many Sparrows

THE PATHFINDERS SERIES

The Wood's Edge
A Flight of Arrows





A NOVEL

AUTHOR OF MANY SPARROWS





THE KING'S MERCY

All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version.

The characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

Trade Paperback ISBN 978-1-60142-996-4 eBook ISBN 978-1-60142-997-1

Copyright © 2019 by Lori Benton

Cover design by Kristopher K. Orr

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published in the United States by WaterBrook, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

WATERBROOK® and its deer colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Benton, Lori, author.

Title: The king's mercy: a novel / Lori Benton.

Description: First edition. | Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2019.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018042158 ISBN 9781601429964 (pbk.) | ISBN 9781601429971 (electronic)

Subjects: | GSAFD: Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3602.E6974 K56 2019 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018042158

Printed in the United States of America

2019—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.

—I CORINTHIANS 4:2



This book is dedicated to my pastor, Jon Courson, who for decades has taught God's Word, chapter by chapter, book by book, in a manner consistently practical and profound—along the way inspiring more than a few lines of dialogue that appear in this story and in every story I've written.

There will come a time when you believe everything is finished. That will be the beginning.

—Louis L'Amour





SUMMER 1747 — SPRING 1748



Let every man seek his own safety the best way he can.

—Prince Charles Edward Stuart to his defeated Jacobite army



July 1747 Cape Fear River, Colony of North Carolina

lex MacKinnon roused to the press of wood beneath his cheek and an ominous churning in his gut. He tried to rise, but his hands were bound behind him. Without their aid he made it to his knees and, as the world spun in a blur of sunlit green, lost the contents of his stomach into mud-black water rushing past below. A powerful grip dragged him back onto rough planks. He felt solidness behind his back—curving barrel staves, hotly fragrant in the sweltering heat.

"Catch yo' breath," said a voice deep enough to have issued from a well's nethermost reaches. "Don't do no stupid."

Alex drew up his knees and dropped his head, then jerked as a lance of pain split his skull. Moving must be the *stupid* the well-bottom voice warned against.

"Still yo'self," it cautioned now.

Alex complied. The pain in his head receded to a pounding. Sweat stung what must be a gash at his temple. Dried blood stiffened his face. Arms, legs, torso all ached with the bruises left by blows. He'd been attacked.

"Ah, Demas," said another voice. "He's awake? Excellent. I was about to be concerned."

The speaker hadn't sounded concerned. He'd sounded downright blithe. And *English*.

The surface beneath Alex dipped. Nausea surged with the motion. This time he forced it back, eyes shut against the sun-glare.

"And here at last we've the tide to speed us along," the English voice added.

The scrape of wood on wood. Water splashing. Feet thumping boards. Men's voices rising and relaxing as at the end of prolonged exertion. All familiar. All wrong.



Alex opened his eyes. Though not yet high in the sky, the Carolina sun burned fierce. Bearing its assault, he took in what he made for the aft deck of a flatboat. Within his view a man, shirtless back a glistening blue-black, had hauled in a dripping pole and was stowing it along the deck rail, over which Alex had been sick. The vessel surged, picking up speed though none poled it now that he could see.

Alarmed, he looked out over silty water, expecting to see the merchant ship, *Charlotte-Ann*, riding at anchor beyond the smaller craft lining Wilmington's quay. He didn't see the quay. A tree-lined bank slid past, edged in mudflats dotted with quarreling seabirds.

They were on the river.

A throat's clearing curtailed his observations. Squinting, Alex made out the Englishman seated on a crate shaded by a cabin in the craft's center. He wore no coat or hat, but his breeches and waistcoat were cut of good cloth and fit his trim person well. With dark hair smoothly tailed, he bore no trace of sweat on his brow, as if the neckcloth knotted below his chin didn't smother him. He looked not yet thirty.

The man bared good teeth in a smile, an expression that took his unremarkable features—longish nose, thin lips, hazel eyes overshadowed by strong brows—and rearranged them into a mask of disarming appeal.

He'd seen the man before. Alex closed his eyes, searching his memory for that face, and found it.

His eyes flew open. "Ye've made a mistake! I'd an agreement with the ship's master. Captain Bingham will tell ye . . ." But Bingham wouldn't. The *Charlotte-Ann*'s captain was complicit in this. Minding that now, too, Alex strained against his bindings. Could he pitch himself overboard, hope to reach the bank?

"I wouldn't try it," the Englishman advised. "Alligators infest these waters. You missed the last sighting. Quite the sizeable specimen."

Alligators. Alex had yet to see one of the fearsome beasts since they'd begun their piloted journey into Wilmington's sandbar-riddled harbor, but the *Charlotte-Ann*'s crew had encountered them on voyages past. His sweating scalp crawled at the thought of jagged teeth closing over him, powerful jaws



dragging him under the river's dark surface. Still, he'd rather face that battle than what awaited him at this riverine journey's end.

He made it halfway to his feet before the massive hand that had steadied him before clutched his neck from behind. Alex bucked and thrashed, in the process glimpsing the African who had hold of him. He sucked in air, or tried to. Thick fingers squeezed. Just as he felt himself sliding into darkness, the grip on his neck eased.

The Englishman in the shade had watched, unperturbed. "Demas once snapped a man's neck one-handed—so I've heard. Promise to cease thrashing about and I'll bid him release you. Then we'll discuss your situation like civilized men"

Glaring, Alex jerked his chin against the gripping fingers.

At a glance from the Englishman his throat was released. The African hunkered within arm's reach, powerful hands loose between thighs like tree trunks.

Alex concentrated on breathing, forcing swallows past what felt like rocks lodged in his throat.

The Englishman raised a brow. "Are you a civilized man? I know you for a Jacobite, one of those Stuart rebels King George defeated . . . When was it? A year since?"

Alex might have told him to the day.

"Alastair Seamus MacKinnon by name, according to your papers," the Englishman went on. "Well, MacKinnon, I'm Phineas Reeves, and this craft we occupy belongs to Severn, the plantation for which we're bound. The journey will take the day long. Perhaps into the night. Time enough for us to become acquainted."

"It wasna meant to be me," Alex ground out. "Take me back."

"To Wilmington? We're miles upriver, moving with the tide. Even were we not, Captain Bingham has no further claim on you. You're indentured to a new master."

The gut-churn threatened. "D'ye not mean yourself? Ye're the owner of the *Charlotte-Ann*."

"Me? I'm but his overseer. A hired man, as is Captain Bingham. As for the prisoners brought over from London—including yourself—it was from their



number the *Charlotte-Ann*'s owner was to have first pick. Surely Bingham informed you of the arrangement."

"He gave me to think otherwise."

"That would explain the difficulty we had in extricating you." Something akin to contrition crossed Phineas Reeves's face. "I was sent downriver to meet the *Charlotte-Ann* and bring back a likely man for Severn. You seemed exceedingly so to me, and Captain Bingham was agreeable to the choice. He'd sold the rest of his indentures before we started upriver, and I must return with someone. You can appreciate my position."

The shock of it was stunning. Reeves's voice cut through it like the jabs of a blade.

"I regret the headache you must be enduring. I'm afraid Demas doesn't know his strength."

Recalling the careful clenching of that massive hand at his throat, Alex took leave to disagree.

"This should help." Reeves held out a canteen. Too thirsty to refuse, Alex took it and drank while the man nattered on. "It occurs to me I haven't named your master. Edmund Philip Carey, Captain of His Majesty's Royal Navy, retired. His last command was the frigate *Severn*, for which his plantation is named."

Ceasing to listen, Alex looked round him again with aching eyes. The men piloting the barge were a motley lot: black, white, somewhere between, one possibly a red Indian. He knew little of the natives of this New World. Purportedly fierce, warlike, prone to taking a man's scalp off his head—if his fellow seamen were to be credited. Reckoning himself safe enough from scalping at present, he cast a bleary gaze across the wide river at the shoreline passing in a green tangle, raised the canteen to his lips, and drained it as dry as his plummeting hope.

Why had he trusted Bingham—an Englishman—after everything?

"... and that's where I first met Captain Carey. I was a cabin boy aboard the *Severn*... in another lifetime." Reeves, still chattering away, smiled again as Alex flicked him a glance. "Doubtless you're wondering what Captain Carey means to do with *you* for the next seven years."



He hadn't entertained the faintest curiosity. Until now.

"Plantations on the river tend toward the sprawling, thousands of acres, and so require to be self-supporting. Severn has its coopers, millers, carpenters. It *had* a blacksmith, until six months ago when an unfortunate accident rendered the fellow unfit for the work. That's where you come into it, MacKinnon. You're to be trained in the smith's art. I chose you for your size. You're the first man I've seen who comes close to matching Demas's physique. Perhaps with another stone or two of meat on those long bones, you shall."

Reeves grinned as though he'd delivered the best possible news.

Seven years. His strength spent at an Englishman's pleasure, without even the freedom of the sea. Demas seemed to sense the impulse to escape that again swept through him. The African tensed, but when Alex made no move he settled again, hands loosening from the fists he'd made of them. Fists like hammers

That was meant to be his lot. Hammers and fire and glowing iron. *Seven years*.

On his side again with the sun beating down like a forge's fire, grief and rage flowed over him. He was well and truly a prisoner in that godforsaken place, though why should that surprise? God had forsaken him months ago on a moor near Inverness.



16 April 1746 Culloden Moor, Scotland

From the first cannon's thundering, then the screaming charge that carried the Highland army into the Duke of Cumberland's scarlet lines, the battle had been bloody bedlam. Alex MacKinnon had slain too many men to count, with never attention to spare beyond the reach of his broadsword; just now a redcoat had his blade tip caught in its woven guard. Giving the sword a violent twist, Alex snapped the snagged blade clean. Wrenched nearly off his feet, the redcoat left his throat exposed above a muddied stock. Alex had only his sword arm



free. The other gripped his uncle. Wounded by the redcoat before Alex could intervene, Rory MacNeill sagged against him, a gash opened deep in his thigh.

Raging against exhaustion as much as his foe, Alex roared with the effort needed to swing his blade across that exposed English neck. The redcoat slumped, dead before he hit the ground.

With the shout that carried him through the deed dying on his lips, Alex had space to look about. It was chaos on the moor, curtained in the gray of powder smoke and sleet. Icy needles flayed his cheeks as he squinted to see men reeling, locked in combat with sword and dirk, halberd and bayonet. Their screams mingled with the keening wind that cut through soaked linen, leather, even wool. Somewhere an officer shouted, gathering men—to fight or flee there was no telling. Around him lay the slain.

When no more redcoats loomed from the mist to challenge him, Alex thought of refuge, a place to lay his uncle, tend that gaping wound. At once he saw it, a dip in the moorland where the fighting had passed. He made out a blur of green farther along: pines, scrawny and wind-stunted. Shelter enough.

Strands of his uncle's hair whipped Alex's face as he grappled for a better hold. Pain tightened Rory MacNeill's voice as his hand clamped his thigh. "I'll manage, lad—dinna slow yourself on my account."

Alex drove his heels into the muddy turf to stay upright. "Wheest, Uncle. Let me help ye."

Rain had collected at the depression's base, along with bodies. Red-stained water gushed icy through Alex's cracked shoes as they wove their way, Rory cursing Charles Stuart with every step. As he ought to have been cursing Alex.

Surrounded by the fallen, plaids blending with moor grass and heather, he kent his uncle had been right to abide by The MacNeill's will. Their chief had dithered away the months of the Stuart campaign to retake the English throne for the exiled King James, neither lending the Jacobite cause support nor openly censuring it. Thinking himself wiser at twenty-two than Rory at nine-and-forty, Alex had crossed to Skye, joined his father's MacKinnon clan, and marched away to restore King James to the throne. Without the blessing of uncle, chief, or any saint he'd ever prayed to.

At Inverness, days ago, Rory had found him, tried again to persuade him



from his course, knowing the ill turn the campaign had taken. Alex had given his oath to the House of Stuart. Men depended upon him. Did his uncle expect him to do other than hold to his word, having raised him to count it his bond?



Rory had thinned his lips, said no more, and stayed to fight beside him, but devil take him now if Alex meant to let the man *die* beside him too.

They made it to the pine thicket before Rory's knees buckled.

With his towering frame a throwback to the raiding Norseman who had been his several-times great-grandfather, Alex MacKinnon was no wee man, but Rory MacNeill shared his blood and the older man was a deal heavier. He slipped from Alex's hold and landed hard. The blood snaking through the fingers clutching his thigh thinned in a spate of freezing rain.

From the pines a corbie's cry erupted like a pistol's crack, a warning Alex was too slow to heed.

Needled boughs swept aside as a wall of scarlet coats burst from the thicket. He'd no time to raise his sword before pain burst at the back of his skull. There came an instant of blinding light, then darkness closed like a tunnel, at its end his uncle's face, twisted in pain and helpless fury, blood on the hands reaching for him.

July 1747 Cape Fear River

lex jerked awake aboard the flatboat, poled upriver now against an ebbing tide. The sun hung above the towering trees through which the river snaked, its light falling aslant. He still smelled the salt marsh of the river's mouth, but stronger now on the humid air hung the tang of pine resin. Iridescent dragonflies darted at the river's edge. Mosquitoes clouded its surface. Some had landed on his sweating flesh and stuck there, sprinkled in the blond hairs of his forearms.

"Awake again?" the Englishman, Reeves, asked, stepping into view between a row of crates and the flatboat's cabin. "May I trust to your docility?"

Alex's hands had been freed while he slept, but the African hovered near, dark face gleaming. Rubbing at his wrists, Alex jerked a nod. Reeves held out another canteen. Alex took it and drank, getting his bearings. Along the craft's side two men drove poles into the river and pushed against the current. Voices issued from the cabin, sounding as men did when gaming. Reeves, the former seaman, had them on watches. The bell for Alex's own would soon be sounding aboard the *Charlotte-Ann*, if he was any judge of time.

Accepting the canteen once Alex drank his fill, Reeves took a seat on the bench beside the cabin. "It's a fine forge where you'll be trained, a well-appointed smithy," he began, continuing their earlier conversation as if there'd been no pause. "Though the work is limited to Severn's needs, that's plenty to be getting on with."

Alex stared at the riverbank sliding by. They were passing a plantation now. A break in the trees revealed a stretch of land planted in what must be Indian corn, leaves like sword blades waving. Nearer was a dock intended for craft



smaller than their laden vessel. Against his will, curiosity kindled.

"What manner of plantation is—Severn, did ye call it? Rice? Indigo?" He'd heard those crops were grown in the Carolinas.

Reeves flashed a gratified smile. "Neither. Captain Carey manufactures naval stores—tar, pitch. Lumber too. Most of Severn's acreage is long-leaf pine, but close by the Big House corn is grown, tobacco, flax for Miss Carey's weavers."

"Miss Carey?"

Reeves's smile twitched. "She's the captain's eldest daughter. Stepdaughter, to be precise. Though Miss Carey is mistress of Severn, Charlotte is the captain's true daughter."

"Charlotte? Has she yellow hair?"

Surprise brightened Reeves's eyes. "How could you—ah, of course. The *Charlotte-Ann*'s figurehead bears her likeness. A pretty girl, Charlotte. Everyone adores . . ." Reeves shifted a glance at Demas, then picked up smoothly, "Severn isn't the largest plantation on the Cape Fear, but it is of respectable acreage. Three slave gangs work the forest. A smaller gang runs the lumber mill—have I mentioned the mill? There are carpenters and coopers, a groom and some stable lads. Between the house, kitchen, and the weaving sheds, Miss Carey oversees twenty or so, women and girls, those too old to work elsewhere. I'm kept occupied overseeing the captain's business interests."

"What, then, does he do?" Alex interjected.

"Captain Carey? I suppose he oversees me." Reeves hesitated, then waved an apologetic hand. "An egregious oversimplification. There's much for a man of Captain Carey's station to manage. He cannot daily run hither and you across the breadth of occupation Severn encompasses."

Alex raised a brow. "It's ye does the running hither?"

Reeves's mouth curved, as though the question amused. "It is. And I'd do more than that for the man. I owe Captain Carey everything. He took me in a year ago when I had next to nothing, treated me better than I merited . . ."

"Oh, aye?" Alex asked, catching another shift of those hazel eyes.

Reeves hesitated. "It's only . . . He isn't the man I knew aboard the Severn.



He's also recently retired as a justice of the peace for the New Hanover court. It may be his years in that capacity showed him too much of human nature's less desirable aspects. Such is bound to leave a man jaded."

Never mind this Captain Carey, generous *and* jaded; Alex was having trouble enough taking Reeves's measure. The man talked too much. Was it fear motivating this chatter, fear that Reeves would feel the brunt if the new indenture he'd chosen failed to fall agreeably in line with his master's designs?

Perhaps so; Reeves chose that moment to produce a document from inside the coat he'd laid on the bench. The indenture.



May 1746 Inverness, Scotland

The surface beneath him heaved. His belly echoed the motion, spewing forth the oat gruel they fed those condemned to hell—and hell it must be. He'd spent his life on the sea in boats and never felt such a ruckus in his innards. *God have mercy*.

Memories surfaced. The shivering torment of naked stone—had that been a kirk, where they put them after the battle? The dark and dank of a ship at anchor. Crowded flesh unwashed and festering. His uncle's face swam through the memories. Like Alex, Rory MacNeill had been stripped to his shirt—plaid, belt, shoes, sporran, anything of value confiscated. His uncle's wound was never stitched, the gash held closed by a strip of soiled shirting. He could lend Alex no support, struggling himself to remain standing when forced to it.

"Come, lad. They'll have us on our feet again. Let's show these Lobsters they canna best a Barra man." His uncle's voice lapped across his mind like waves on a shingle. "A minute more on your feet. Feel the sea air. Breathe it in. Clear the cobwebs, does it?" It hadn't. Still, he'd clung to the voice like a drowning man and shuffled forward. Light as bright as blades. Gulls screeching fit to pierce his skull. The shove of strangers' hands. Groans of suffering. The roiling. The thirst. "Rest ye now. I'm here with ye, Alex . . ."

Alex MacKinnon. His name. His father's clan, though he'd lived all but



his first years among the MacNeills of Barra, harvesting the fish, pasturing the cattle, riding with his uncle to collect the quit-rents for their chief. He was twenty-two . . . no, it must be three-and-twenty now, an unworthy nephew to the man who took him to hearth and heart, orphaned at three.

"Uncle?"

A clink of metal beside him. "Aye, lad. They've kept us together."

Together in the stench and chill of a ship's hold. He could barely see the contours of his uncle's face, high in the cheek and brow as his own, beard grizzled with an old man's gray though he was now but fifty.

"We're alive, then?"

A low dry chuckle, familiar as sight. "Looks to be we are. Though I'll not argue if ye wish to call this hell."

Guilt weighed like a cairn. "I'm sorry."

His uncle's hand, rough and cold, closed over his arm. "Ye did as your conscience bid ye, lad. Ye've always had that about ye, a need for a purpose beyond yourself. 'Tis the Almighty knit ye so. Besides, 'twas I chose to stand with ye at the end."

A groan rose somewhere near. The wheeze of labored breathing. They weren't alone. Alex moved his legs, felt the pull of chain; his ankles were manacled to the timbers enclosing them in near darkness. "How long since the battle?"

"Tomorrow marks Beltane. We lie at anchor, still at Inverness."

A fortnight. He absorbed that as Rory bridged the gap for him. After the redcoats came boiling from the pines and bashed his head, they'd been trussed and tossed into a cart bound for part of the field where the measured crack of gunfire bespoke execution. Then, for no reason Rory could fathom, the driver had taken a turn in the track. They'd left the moor to jostle over miles to Inverness. There, forced inside a kirk crowded with shivering, wounded Jacobites, they'd languished for two days lacking food and water, another eight without doctoring.

"Why did they not shoot us on the field? Some soldier's notion of mercy?"

"Nay," croaked a stranger's voice. "None but a blackhearted cur would have spared ye a quick death to rot in this hold."

If it was a jest, no one laughed.



"Ye've been in and out of the mist all this while," Rory told Alex in lower tones. "I've been that afraid ye'd never come full out."

Hip and shoulder as well as head throbbing, Alex sat up. His own stench overpowered. Humiliation washed him in a foul wave. He flinched when Rory touched him again. "What mean they to do with us?"

"Hang and quarter us," someone from the shadows replied. "Bring us to trial first, o' course. They mean to take us to London."

Bones aching, Alex drew up his knees as far as the chains allowed, put his back to dank timbers, tried to make out the men around him, their sufferings marked by shuffles, clanks, groans. "How many are we? What is our number?"

A suspended moment passed, then out of the dimness came a response. "We numbered twenty-six together when put aboard. We're one-and-twenty now. Elsewhere on this ship are more."

Alex searched the dim forms huddled in the hold but could make out no man distinct. "Who speaks?"

"Archibald MacKenzie, of Inverness."

"MacKenzie," Alex echoed, putting name and voice to memory. "Tell your names, all. And d'ye wish, that of brother, father, or son that fell beside ye. Let us name our dead."

"My name ye ken," said MacKenzie. "I saw three cousins fall. Dougal, James, Duncan. Sons of my mother's sister."

"Duncan *I* am," said another. "Duncan Ross of Cromarty. My auld da—Hector Mor—fell to the cannons in the first rush."

"Ross," Alex said. "Who else?"

"Adam Cluny," a creaky voice answered. "An elder brother I lost. He was seventy-six winters, still hale."

"Aye, Cluny. And how old are ye?"

"Only seventy-three!"

A murmur—not quite laughter—rippled through the dark.

Out of the shadows, one by one, men made themselves known. Alex echoed back their names, putting all he could into them of respect, until it came round at last to Rory.

"Me ye well ken, but for any who cares, I'm Rory MacNeill, tacksman to



my chief, The MacNeill of Barra, and this beside me is my sister's son, Alastair MacKinnon. Alex, he's called."

"MacKinnon," said MacKenzie, who'd spoken first. "A right wee giant ye are. I havena yet seen an English guard with gall enough to devil ye. We've vied for the honor of hauling your carcass about at muster."

"I'm gratified to have afforded ye the service." Alex waited, but there was no more. "Besides my uncle I counted only eighteen. Who's yet to speak?"

"That would be me," a voice said, younger and haler than Alex expected. "Hugh Cameron of Glendessary. Beside me fell my father, Alexander Cameron, and my brothers, Iain and Archie. I've but the one wee half-brother left, too much a bairn to take up arms for the Stuarts."

"Cameron. May your wee brother live in whatever freedom we've left him." A few weak *amens* arose, but Alex didn't add his own. His head was throbbing again. "I'll rest a bit, Uncle, I think."

"Aye, lad. Ye've earnt a wee lie-down."

"Earnt it, have I?"

"Listen."

Alex cast the net of his hearing past the drumbeat in his skull. The men around him were speaking to one another. Talk of battles, aye, but more of home, of kin.

"Ye gave them back a bit of their dignity. 'Tis more than I've managed in a fortnight."

Alex slipped away and left them to it.



June 1746–May 1747 London, England

The river was the Thames, the fortress on its shore, Tilbury Fort. The prison ships that had plied the passage from Inverness anchored there. The Jacobites were transferred to new quarters, crammed within the fort. More ships lay at anchor, ready to receive the overflow into yet another foul pit. For Rory MacNeill and Alex MacKinnon, the name of the pit was the *James & Mary*.



June was waning. Those who would die of wounds taken at Culloden had likely done so. The rest had made it to London, where surely the waiting would be swift. But summer passed into autumn without word of the promised trial. Bowels griped. Skin broke open in sores. Flesh fell away to gauntness. Rage was a hot knife in the brain.

Alex clung to sanity, casting his mind like a greedy net back to his life before, to clean wind rippling over machair pastures where his uncle's cattle grazed; to open seas beyond their ketch's bow, at his shoulder the white sands and scattered islets hemming Barra's coastline like a tattered cloak; to clouds lying low on the rounded head of Ben Tangaval; seals barking their eerie chorus in the mist; burns rushing through sheltering glens. Sometimes it was hearth and home his mind caressed—the croft built in the shelter and with some of the stones of an ancient crumbling broch; a fire of peat turfs filling it with their smoked-earth smell; a table laden with the simple fare of men without wives to do for them; thick walls snug against a lashing sea-wind.

He talked of it all to the men in the hold and listened while they spoke of their places and people, guarding his mind against rumors that reached them through their taunting guards—of Highland farms razed, widows and orphans turned out to starve, weapons surrendered, glens trodden under English boots.

Five months after Culloden, old Adam Cluny ceased his suffering, having marked his seventy-fourth year in darkness. English hands hauled him from the hold, a sack of bones wrapped in oil-cloth, as Cluny's fellow prisoners stood in his honor and Alex besought their guards for better rations. The current half-pound of meal per day would see them all follow Cluny soon enough. Hugh Cameron stood beside him. Together they petitioned for clothing, some manner of bedding against the river's deepening chill. They were told to be grateful it wasn't yet winter.

God . . . someone . . . have mercy.

It was a black day when Rory MacNeill woke drenched in fever-sweat. The gash to his thigh hadn't healed as he'd feigned. In the weeks past some foulness had reopened it and it had festered. "Why didna ye tell me, Uncle?"

"The way ye try so hard to lift these men \dots I didna have the heart."



They half-carried his uncle up to the deck when they were marshaled out, as once they'd half-carried Alex. It was at that time they heard of the lottery. "We'll not all be tried," he told Rory when the man was lucid enough to comprehend. "One in twenty will stand trial, chosen by lot. The rest will be granted the king's mercy."

"King's mercy, is it?" Rory said dryly. "And which will be the lucky ones, those of us who hang or those who dinna?"

His uncle did neither

Two days after Rory MacNeill's body was taken to be buried in English soil, Alex learnt his own fate: not death but exile and transportation to the American Colonies, there to serve out a seven-year indenture. The news gutted him less than had his last words with his uncle.

"I wish ye hadna come after me, Uncle. I wish ye'd loved me less,"

"Never wish it. I couldna be prouder of the braw man ye've made. I shall tell my sister so when I see her." Taking weak hold of his hand, Rory MacNeill added, "If Almighty God grants His grace, ye'll survive King Geordie's mercy."

Not until his uncle expelled his final breath had Alex dared whisper what he'd come to believe since Culloden. *Mercy*. "It's but a word, Uncle. There isna mercy to be granted, by king or God."

He was all but certain no God existed who cared enough to grant it.



Along with those of five other Jacobites sentenced to transportation, Alex's indenture was purchased by Roger Bingham, master of a merchant ship anchored in the Thames. The *Charlotte-Ann* and her cargo belonged to an Englishman in the Colony of North Carolina. One of their number, Bingham informed them, would owe his next seven years to that Englishman. The rest were Bingham's to sell once they reached port in Wilmington.

On a morning in May, over a year since his capture, Alex was rowed out to the *Charlotte-Ann*. He was just turned four-and-twenty, nearly three stone underweight, with a rattle in his chest that had plagued him since the winter. The tar-laden air of the Thames was thick with the clamor of seamen and customs



officials haggling and hallooing one another from shore and deck, raucous as the gulls wheeling about the forested masts. Alex eyed the lines of the vessel set to carry him across the sea. She was straight and blunt of stern, three masted, square rigged like the frigates he'd seen off Barra's coast, the figurehead at her prow a lassie with yellow-painted hair.

Last of the indentures to board, Alex climbed the ladder to stand before the master and mate awaiting them on deck. Captain Bingham, hair clubbed back from a weathered face, had seen their bills of sale signed and locked away. Head and shoulders above the other prisoners, Alex drew stares from the crew busy about the rigging or stowing casks and crates. He made a lance of his spine, refusing to give an inch, as Bingham looked him over.

"Remind me—which are you?" Bingham's speech was flat and faintly nasal. He'd been born, another of the Jacobites had said, in a place called Boston.

"Alastair MacKinnon," Alex replied, with all the lilt of Barra he could infuse into the syllables.

Bingham lofted a measuring brow. "What are you, then, six inches shy of seven feet?"

"Seven inches shy, I'm told . . . sir." Wind through the rigging made a riffling whine. The deck heaved under his feet. Alex closed his eyes and was back aboard his uncle's ketch, off the coast of home. The pang of loss nearly doubled him. He opened his eyes.

Bingham stepped back, nodding to his mate. "See to their berths. Get them rations, water—and for pity's sake, some decent clothing."

Down into the hold they went. Not in chains or filth—or not barbaric filth. It was still a ship, cramped and dank. They'd hammocks, food enough, a ration of the rum. Whenever the seas were calm they were permitted to walk under the sun, no more bound than was any man by prow and stern. Alex sometimes thought of the prisoners who survived the *James & Mary*—an outbreak of typhus after midwinter had again thinned their ranks. Of that original group that shared quarters with him and his uncle and hadn't gone to trial, he knew of two survivors: Hugh Cameron and Archibald MacKenzie. Neither man was aboard the *Charlotte-Ann*.



One week out to sea he felt strength returning. Two weeks out four of the crew lay dying of the bloody flux, leaving Captain Bingham applying to his indentures to replace them. The chief mate, learning Alex had some acquaintance with sea-going vessels, sweetened the offer with the promise of more generous rations and a berth with the crew.

"I'll take that offer," Alex said. Moments later his hands were on the rigging.

It went hard those first days, rising with the watches to unaccustomed labor, but as the *Charlotte-Ann* cleaved the dark Atlantic, Alex found the rhythm of the work. He was hungry day and night; full sea rations weren't enough to restore the weight he'd lost, but as his frame gradually hardened to whipcord, the rage in his soul was banked. Work filled his days, the salt air his lungs, and there were moments—watching the sun sink westward in a beribboned blaze, or the stars netting the black of night—when he recalled how freedom felt.

Continue Reading...

Order
THE KING'S
MERCY
now!



BUY NOW

