

**KIRAN MILLWOOD
HARGRAVE**

a novel



"A gripping novel . . .
Beautiful and chilling."
—MADELINE MILLER

**THE
MERCIES**

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A Novel

**KIRAN
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HARGRAVE**



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raise(d) me

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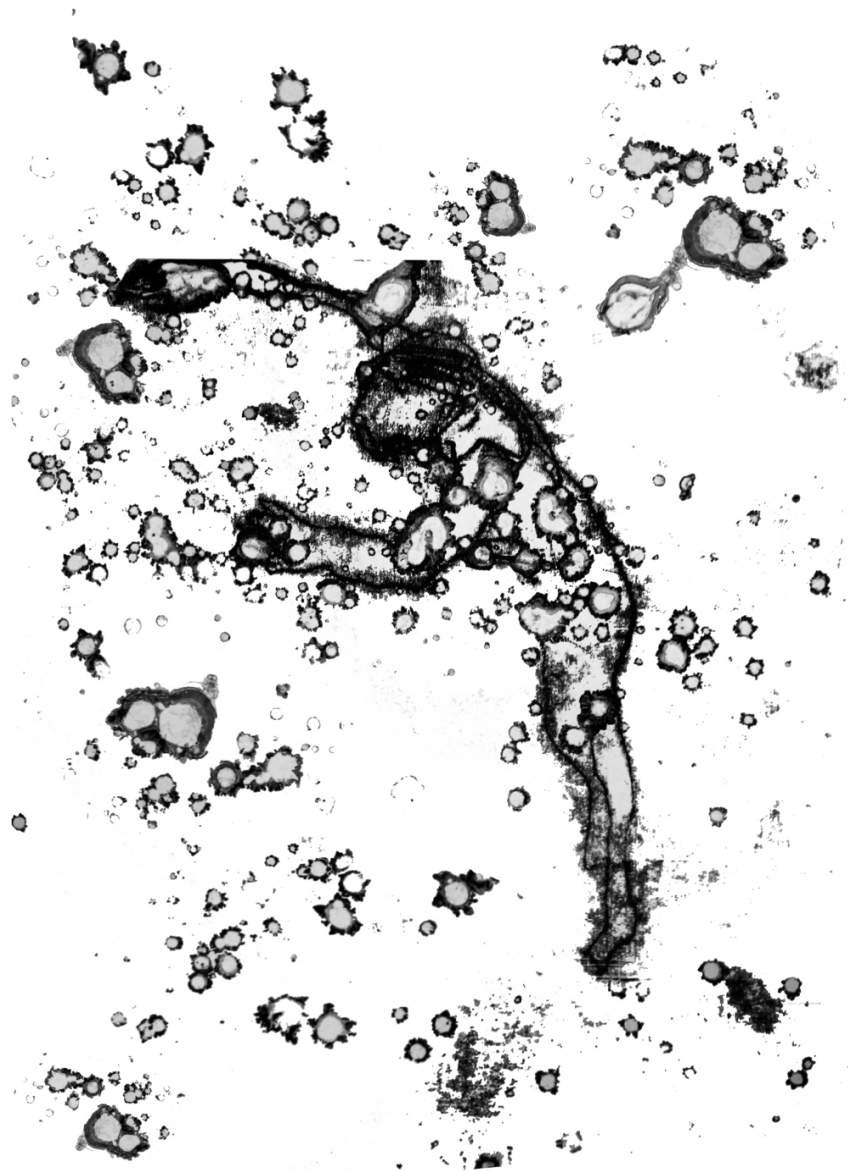
If any sorcerer, or faithful man, had the sacrifice of God and His Holy Word and Christianity, and devoted himself to the dævil, he should be cast down on fire and incineration.

FROM

Denmark–Norway Trolddom (Sorcery) Decree 1617,

ENACTED FINNMARK 1620

STORM



VARDØ, FINNMARK, NORTH-EASTERN

NORWAY 1617

Last night Maren dreamt a whale beached itself on the rocks outside her house.

She climbed down the cliff to its heaving body and rested her eye against its eye, wrapped her arms across the great stinking swell. There was nothing she could do for it but this.

The men came scrambling down the black rock like dark, swift insects, glinting and hard-bodied with blades and scythes. They began to swing and cut before the whale was even dead. It bucking and all of them grim and holding like nets tight about a shoal, her arms growing long and strong around it—so wide and fierce she held it—until she didn't know if she was a comfort or a menace and didn't care, only watched its eye with her eye, not blinking.

Eventually it stilled, its breath melting out as they hacked and sawed. She smelt the blubber burning in the lamps before it stopped moving, long before the bright roll of its eye beneath her eye wore down to dullness.

She sank down into the rocks until she stood at the bottom of the sea. The night above was dark and moonless, stars scarring the surface. She drowned and came up from sleep gasping, smoke in her nostrils and at the dark back of her throat. The taste of burning fat caught under her tongue, and would not be washed away.

ONE

The storm comes in like a finger snap. That's how they'll speak in the months and years after, when it stops being only an ache behind their eyes and a crushing at the base of their throats. When it finally fits into stories. Even then, it doesn't tell how it actually was. There are ways words fall down: they give shape too easily, carelessly. And there was no grace, no ease to what Maren saw.

That afternoon, the best sail is spread like a blanket across her lap, Mamma and Diinna at its other corners. Their smaller, neater fingers are working smaller, neater stitches into the wind-wear tears, while she patches cloth over holes left by the mast fastenings.

Beside the fire there's a stack of white heather drying, cut and brought by her brother Erik from the low mountain on the mainland. Tomorrow, after, Mamma will give her three palmfuls for her pillow. She'll wrench it apart, stuff it earth and all into the casing, the honey scent almost sickening after months of only the stale smell of sleep and unwashed hair. She'll take it between her teeth and scream until her lungs wheeze with the sweet dirt tang of it.

Now, something makes her look up and out towards the window. A bird, dark against dark, a sound? She stands to stretch, to watch the bay, flat grey and beyond it the open sea, tips of waves like smashed glass glittering. The boats are loosely pegged out against it by their two small lights, bow and aft, barely flickering.

She imagines she can tell Pappa and Erik's apart from the others, with its second-best sail rigged tight to the mast. The jerk and stop-start of their rowing, their backs to the horizon where the sun skulks, out of sight for a month now, and for another month to

come. The men will see the steady light from Vardø's curtainless houses, lost in their own sea of dim-lit land. They're already out beyond the Hornøya stac, nearly at the place where the shoal was sighted earlier in the afternoon, worried into bright action by a whale.

"It will have passed on," Pappa said. Mamma has a great terror of whales. "Well eaten its fill by the time Erik manages to haul us there with those herringbone arms."

Erik only bowed his head to accept Mamma's kiss, and his wife Diinna's press of thumb to his forehead that the Sámi say will draw a thread to reel men at sea home again. He rested a hand on her belly for a moment, bringing the swell of it more obviously through her knitted tunic. She pushed his hand away, but gently.

"You'll call it early. Let it be."

After, Maren will wish she rose and kissed them both on each rough cheek. She will wish she had watched them go to the water in their stitched sealskins, her father's strung-out stride and Erik's shambling behind. Wish that she had felt anything at all about them going, other than gratitude for the time alone with Mamma and Diinna, for the easiness of other women.

Because, at twenty and with her first marriage proposal come three weeks before, she at last considered herself one of them. Dag Bjørnsson was making them a home from his father's second boathouse, and before winter was done it would be finished, and they wed.

Inside, he told her, panting hot, scratching breath beneath her ear, would be a fine hearth and separate food store so he wouldn't need to walk through the house with his axe like Pappa did. The wicked glint, even in Pappa's careful hands, brought bile to her tongue. Dag knew this, and cared to know.

He was blond as his mother, delicately featured in a way that Maren knew other men took to mean weakness, but she didn't mind. She didn't mind that he brushed his wide mouth against her throat, as he told her of the sheet she should weave for the bed he would build for them. And though she didn't feel anything at his hesitant caress at her back, too gentle and high to mean much at all through

her dark blue winter dress, this house that would be hers—this hearth and bed—sent a pulse low in her belly. At night she'd press her hands to the places she'd felt the warmth, fingers cold bars across her hips and numb enough not to be hers.

Not even Erik and Diinna have their own house: they live in the narrow room Maren's father and brother tacked along the back edge of their outer wall. Their bed fills the width of it, is pressed flush against Maren's own through the divide. She put her arms over her head on their first nights together, breathing in the musty straw of her mattress, but never heard so much as a breath. It was a wonder when Diinna's belly started to show. The baby would be here just after winter left, and then there would be three in that slender bed.

After, she will think: perhaps she should have watched for Dag too.

But instead she fetched the damaged sailcloth and spread it over all their knees, and did not look up until the bird or the sound or the change in the air called her to the window to watch the lights shifting across the dark sea.

Her arms crackle: she brings one needle-coarsened finger to the other and pushes it under her woollen cuff, feels the hair stiff and the skin beneath it tightening. The boats are still rowing, still steady in the uncertain light, lamps glimmering.

And then the sea rises up and the sky swings down and greenish lightning slings itself across everything, flashing the black into an instantaneous, terrible brightness. Mamma is fetched to the window by the light and the noise, the sea and sky clashing like a mountain splitting so they feel it through their soles and spines, sending Maren's teeth into her tongue and hot salt down her gullet.

And then maybe both of them are screaming but there is no sound save the sea and the sky and all the boat lights swallowed and the boats flashing and the boats spinning, the boats flying, turning, gone. Maren goes spilling out into the wind, creased double by her suddenly sodden skirts, Diinna calling her in, wrenching the door behind to keep the fire from going out. The rain is a weight on her shoulders, the wind slamming her back, hands tight in on themselves, grasping nothing. She is screaming so loud her throat

will be bruised for days. All about her, other mothers, sisters, daughters are throwing themselves at the weather: dark, rain-slick shapes, clumsy as seals.

The storm drops before she reaches the harbour, two hundred paces from home, its empty mouth gaping at the sea. The clouds roll themselves up and the waves fall, resting at each other's horizons, gentle as a flock settling.

The women of Vardø gather at the scooped-out edge of their island, and though some are still shouting, Maren's ears ring with silence. Before her, the harbour is wiped smooth as a mirror. Her jaw is caught on the hinges of itself, her tongue dripping blood warm down her chin. Her needle is threaded in the web between her thumb and forefinger, the wound a neat circle of pink.

As she watches, a final flash of lightning illuminates the hatefully still sea, and from its blackness rise oars and rudders and a full mast with gently stowed sails, like underwater forests uprooted. Of their men, there is no sign.

It is Christmas Eve.

TWO

Overnight, the world turns white. Snow piles on snow, filling the windows and the mouths of doors. The kirke stands dark that Christmas, that first day after, a hole between the lit houses, swallowing light.

They are snowed in for three days, Diinna portioned off in her narrow room, Maren unable to rouse herself any more than she can Mamma. They eat nothing but old bread, settling like pebbles in their stomachs. Maren feels the food so solid inside her, and her body so unreal about it, she imagines herself pinned down to the earth only by Mamma's stale loaves. If she doesn't eat, she will become smoke and gather in the eaves of their house.

She keeps herself together by filling her belly until it aches, and by placing as much of herself as possible in the warmth from the fire. Everywhere it touches, she tells herself, she is real. She lifts her hair to show the grubby nape of her neck, spreads her fingers to let the warmth lick between them, lifts her skirts so her woollen stockings begin to singe and stink. *There, and there, and there.* Her breasts, back, and between them her heart, are caught in her winter vest, bundled tight together.

The second day, for the first time in years, the fire goes out. Pappa always laid it, and they only tended it, keeping it banked at night and breaking its crust each morning to let the hot heart of it breathe. Within hours there is a layer of frost on their blankets though Maren and her mother sleep together in the same bed. They don't speak, don't undress. Maren wraps herself in Pappa's old sealskin coat. It was not flensed properly and reeks a little of rotted

fat.

Mamma wears Erik's from when he was a boy. She is dull-eyed as a smoked fish. Maren tries to make her eat, but her mother only curls into her side on the bed, sighs like a child. Maren is grateful for the blankness at the window that means the sea is hidden from sight.

Those three days are a pit she falls into. She watches Pappa's axe wink in the dark. Her tongue grows thick and mossy, the tender place where she bit it during the storm spongy and swollen, with something hard at its centre. She worries at it, and the blood makes her thirstier.

She dreams of Pappa and Erik, wakes dank and sweating, hands freezing. She dreams of Dag and when he opens his mouth it is full of nails meant for their bed. She wonders if they will die there, whether Diinna is already dead, her baby still paddling inside her, slowing. She wonders if God will come to them, and tell them to live.

They are both of them reeking when Kirsten Sørensdatter digs them out on the third night. Kirsten helps them restack and light the fire at last. When she clears the path to Diinna's door, Diinna looks almost furious, the dull gleam of her pouted lip catching in the torchlight, hands pressed hard either side of her swollen belly.

"Kirke," says Kirsten to them all. "It is the Sabbath."

Even Diinna, who doesn't believe in their God, does not argue.

•

It isn't until they are all gathered in the kirke that Maren understands: nearly all their men are dead.

Toril Knudsdatter lights the candles, every one, until the room blazes so bright it stings Maren's eyes. She counts silently. There once were fifty-three men, and now they have but thirteen left: two babes in arms, three elders, and the rest boys too small for the boats. Even the minister is lost.

The women sit in their usual pews, hollows left between where husbands and sons sat, but Kirsten orders them forwards. All but

Diinna obey, dumb as a herd. They take up three of the kirke's seven rows.

"There have been wrecks before," says Kirsten. "We have survived when men are lost."

"But never so many," says Gerda Folnsdatter. "And never my husband among them. Never yours, Kirsten, or Sigfrid's. Never Toril's son. All of them—"

She grips at her throat, falls silent.

"We should pray, or sing," suggests Sigfrid Jonsdatter, and the others look at her poisonously. They have been trapped apart for three days, and all they wish to talk of, all they can speak of, is the storm.

The women of Vardø are looking, all of them, for signs. The storm was one. The bodies, still to come, will be seen as another. But now Gerda speaks of the single tern she saw wheeling above the whale.

"In figures of eight," she says, her ruddy hands arcing through the air. "One, two, three, six times I counted."

"Eight by six means not much at all," says Kirsten dismissively. She is standing beside Pastor Gursson's pulpit with its engraved stand. Her large hand rests upon it, the broad thumb working over the carved shapes her only sign of nerves, or grief.

Her husband is among the drowned, and all her children were buried before they breathed. Maren likes her, has often gone about her tasks with her, but now she sees Kirsten as the others always have: as a woman apart. She is not standing behind the pulpit, but she may as well be: she watches them with a minister's consideration.

"The whale though," says Edne Gunnsdatter, face swollen so tight by tears it looks bruised. "It swam upside down. I saw its white belly shining under the waves."

"It was feeding," says Kirsten.

"It was luring the men," says Edne. "It set the shoal about Hornøya six times, to be sure we'd see."

"I saw that," nods Gerda, crossing herself. "I saw that too."

"You did not," says Kirsten.

"I saw the blood Mattis coughed upon the table a week ago," says Gerda. "It has never scrubbed off."

"I can sand that out for you," says Kirsten smoothly.

"The whale was wrong," says Toril. Her daughter is burrowed against her side so tight she might have been sewed to her hip by Toril's famously neat stitches. "If what Edne says is true, it was sent."

"Sent?" says Sigfrid, and Maren sees Kirsten turn a thankful eye upon her, thinking she has found an ally. "Such a thing is possible?"

A sigh comes from the back of the kirke, and the whole room turns towards Diinna, but she tilts her head back, eyes closed, the brown skin of her throat gleaming gold in the candlelight.

"The Devil works darkly," says Toril, and her daughter presses her face beneath her shoulder, cries out in fear. Maren wonders what terrors Toril has woven into her two surviving children these past three days. "He has power set above all but God's. He could send such a thing. Or it could be called."

"Enough." Kirsten breaks the silence before it can deepen. "This will help nothing."

Maren wants to join her in her certainty, but all she can think of is the shape, the sound that brought her to the window. She had thought it was a bird but now it looms bigger and more unwieldy, five-finned and upside down. Unnatural. It is impossible to stop it leaking into the corner of her vision, even in the blessed light of the kirke.

Mamma stirs, as if from sleep, though the candles have been reflecting off her unblinking eyes since they sat down. When she speaks, Maren can hear the toll silence has taken on her voice.

"The night Erik was born," says Mamma. "There was a red point of light in the sky."

"I remember," says Kirsten, softly.

"And me," says Toril. *And me*, thinks Maren, though she was only two.

"I followed it through the sky until it dropped in the sea," says Mamma, lips barely moving. "It lit the whole water with blood. He was marked—it was meant from that day." She moans and covers

her face. "I should never have let him to sea."

This brings a fresh wave of wailing from the women. Even Kirsten can do nothing to quell it. The candles stutter as there is a rush of cold air into the room, and Maren turns in time to see Diinna striding from the kirke. What words Maren could offer, as she puts her arm about Mamma, would be bitter comfort: *There was nothing for him but the sea.*

Vardø is an island, the harbour like a bite taken out of one side, the other shores too high or rocky for boats to be launched. Maren learnt nets before she learnt hurt, weather before she learnt love. In summer her mother's hands are speckled with the tiny stars of fish scales, flesh hung out to salt and dry like white drapes of baby's swaddling, or else wrapped in reindeer skins and buried to rot.

Pappa used to say that the sea was the shape of their lives. They have always lived by its grace, and long have they died on it. But the storm has made it an enemy, and there is brief talk of leaving.

"I have family in Alta," says Gerda. "There is land and work enough, there."

"The storm did not reach so far?" asks Sigfrid.

"We will hear soon," says Kirsten. "I imagine they'll send word from Kiberg—the storm must surely have struck there."

"My sister will get a message to me," nods Edne. "She has three horses, and it is only a day's ride."

"And a rough crossing," says Kirsten. "The sea is still fierce. We must allow them time to reach us."

Maren listens as others talk of Varanger, or more outlandishly, Tromsø, as if any of them could imagine life in a city, so far away. There is a small disagreement about who would take the reindeer for transport, for they belonged to Mads Petersson, who drowned alongside Toril's husband and sons. Toril seems to think this gives her some standing over them, but when Kirsten announces she will care for the herd no one argues. Maren can't imagine starting a fire, let alone keeping a herd of high-strung beasts through the winter. Toril likely thinks the same, for she drops her claim as quickly as she took it up.

Eventually the talk falters, finishes. Nothing is decided except that

they will wait for word from Kiberg, and send for it if it does not arrive before the week is out.

“Until then, it is best to meet daily at kirke,” says Kirsten, and Toril nods fervently, in agreement for once. “We must watch for each other. The snows seem on their way out, but there’s no telling.”

“Watch for whales,” says Toril, and the light hits her face so Maren can see the bones work beneath her skin. She looks ominous, and Maren wants to laugh. She bites down on the tender spot on her tongue.

There is no more talk of leaving. Walking down the hill homewards, Mamma clinging so tightly it makes her arm ache, Maren wonders if the other women feel as she does: bound to the place now more than ever. Whale or no whale, sign or not, Maren was witness to the death of forty men. Now something in her is tied to this land, as tied as she is trapped.