

Wellington



Book One:

Welcome to Wellington

Long T. Standing

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Authors Note

Wellington is a place that finds you.

Chapter One

Old Joe Monroe stepped off the boat, smiled down at his new deck hand, a well-hung boy in muscle and size. He was bright; Joe liked that. Patting Mally on the back, dust rose from the dirty leather coat, smelling like the shore where he had been found.

Joe was a big man, with the bearing befitting the bending of the salt-swollen wooden plank beneath him. Mally tried not to fall off the board as it bounced beneath Old Joe's weight. Making it safely to land, his boots struck warm stone still damp from the morning tide.

“Welcome to Wellington, where contracts are older than friendships, reputations weigh more than gold, and the air smells faintly of ink, salt, and something quietly burning in a laboratory no one officially approved.”

“All of which are true,” said one voice from the far edge as he wound a massive, scored rope. Pither smiled at Joe, who began to walk towards the pier. Pither looked up to Captain Monroe in more ways than one, Joe's treatment of him back in the day when he was a young shoreboy himself. Those days were long past now, Pither was a Wellington man, and Wellington never looked back.

“Stay close and don’t get swindled if you can help it,” Old Joe laughed, quietly hoping this deckhand might make it out of Wellington alive, not all of them did, as Joe had discovered.

As the women called down from a nearby window, they leered at Mally. Or he may not, Old Joe thought honestly about the young man; he was willing to give him a shot and recommendation anyway, a new life could start. The boy had proven himself a hard worker on the ship, and at 19, he was legally able to work in Wellington without a parent.

“I have never seen so many different things,” Mally said, looking at the spices, dried beans, containers, people and the languages being spoken and yelled. The smell was hot with ink, and paper dust flickered in the sunlight in front of him. Loose pages fluttered overhead like pale birds before catching against chimneys. It was an overwhelmingly bright summer afternoon.

“So much everything.”

The crates bore stamps from kingdoms Mally had never heard of, their inks faded by salt and sun. Mally turned around a few times to try to take it all in.

“Don’t be rude now, lad, say hi,” Old Joe winked and pointed him towards the women who had been trying to get his attention.

“I don’t know any of them,” Mally said honestly, straightening his jacket. He gave them a smile and a nod.

Joe knew he wasn’t going to be able to let the lad leave his sight; 19 and growing up on a shore farm was not 19 in Wellington.

“What is this?” Mally asked of the bottles. The aged man smiled and handed him a short glass with some.

“Best bourbon on the dock, sell you a bottle for the price of five fish, it’s medicinal, you know.”

Old Joe watched Mally accept the dirty shot glass filled with an unknown drink.

“All at once now,” the salesman said, making a quick motion with his hand toward his mouth to show how to take a shot of liquor.

“On the house, lad.”

Joe noticed the bottle was still stained from previous contents, a dark red that did not match the caramel brown the lad was drinking.

Mally did the same motion as the man had shown him, then coughed. He then began to cry, giving the man back his small glass with shaking hands, shaking his head no.

“You’re supposed to drink it, not breathe into your lungs, boy. Breathe into your belly like a man.”

“I,” Mally coughed, his face as red as his hair now, and his blue eyes looking bigger because they had filled with tears.

He coughed again, and Old Joe pulled him along with a laugh and shake of his head.

“We have business perhaps another time,” he told the bootlegger and watched as Mally composed himself.

Old Joe Monroe needed the young man for several reasons, the most important being his face and charm. It would get him into a party in the Southern Hills of Wellington.

As they walked up to his favorite bookstore, RavenBind, a tall man dressed in a dark black suit, stitched in red with a matching top hat and bloodied cane, came out.

“Welcome to Wellington,” Tony, the Tax Collector, said to a poor-looking lad, then looked to Old Joe. “More trouble, Joe?”

“Oh, no doubt,” Joe said as he saw his friend slouched in the window. He shook his head as he and Mally walked towards the shop.

Three worn wooden steps creaked beneath Old Joe's boots. The porch leaned ever so slightly toward the street, and the cracked glass door bore the scars of more than one disagreement.

A man stood up, his lip bleeding and his eye swelling. He straightened his hair and shirt as blood dripped down.

“You need business.”

“I really do,” the merchant replied. “What do you need?”

“Three copies of a book, only three, only to me.”

Joe pulled out the book that several lives had been lost in the process of stealing. Then he handed it to the merchant just as a King had handed it to him.

“How good of copies?”

“Good enough to be believed by Kings and fools alike,” Old Joe joked, knowing Wellington had not had a King in over eighty years. The hand presses of Ravenbind were known for near-pristine fakes, both with talent and by using magic.

“So near perfect, outside as well or just handwritten pages.”

“Oh, the outside is at your discretion; something that invites curiosity is best for this business,” Old Joe told him and tossed a bag of gold coins on the table.

“Should be enough to tide you by till I get back. Got some nice goods coming in soon.”

Picking up the sack, worth twice as much as the work, relief seemed to overcome him.

“It is worth my life, truly. Give me three days to print, and a night to bind. Then come back.”

“No magic presses, just the letters, not even the ink,” Old Joe said, knowing magic printing machines could remember things.

“I understand. Three copies and no more.”

“I will send my boy Mally,” Joe pushed him forward, and Mally put out his hand.

“Shepard Ravenbind, nice to meet you, Mally. Come on the fourth morning, and your books will be ready. It will get ruined. I can provide you with what is left.”

“Joe told me Mr. Ravenbind. I will see you in four days,” Mally followed Old Joe outside. He didn’t understand much about this journal business.

He knew three things: he was hired to go to Wellington, he would deliver three books, receive wages and a new suit to attend a fancy party where he would leave the books in wastebaskets. Nothing more; after that, he was free to seek work wherever he wanted.

Mally hadn't asked many questions, not whose journal, and what party; the fact was, he wasn't on some shore field, pulling vegetables, watching ships go by anymore.

Looking up to Captain Joe, Mally gave him the biggest smile the sea captain had ever seen.

“I am finally in Wellington.”