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VAMPIRATES

BLOOD CAPTAIN

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To Jenny, Jo and Jonathan. Blood is thicker than water!

CHAPTER ONE

THE CROW'S NEST

Come on, Connor. You can do it!"

"Come on, buddy! Keep climbing!"

Connor Tempest grimaced. His legs felt simultaneously as heavy as lead and uncontrollable as jelly. It was a mistake to have paused halfway up. He'd been doing so well. He wanted to conquer this fear. It was time – way past time – but the fear was deep inside him, weighty and immovable as an anchor caught beneath a rock.

He wanted to look down. He struggled to keep his head straight, knowing that looking down was the worst thing he could do. He felt his eyes being pulled like magnets down to the deck, many metres – *too* many metres! – below. Then, down the side of *The Diablo* and deep into the ocean. When you stopped to think about it – and you should *never* stop to think about it – there was a very long way to fall.

"Don't look down!" Cate's voice sailed through the air, strong

and certain. If only he could be as confident as the deputy captain always sounded.

"Come on, lad!" Captain Wrathe called to him. "You've taken on worse foes than a few metres of rigging!"

This was certainly true, thought Connor, his mind flashing with dark snapshots of the past three months. His dad's funeral. Nearly drowning before he was rescued by Cheng Li. Being separated from Grace. The death of his dear comrade Jez. His betrayal by Cheng Li, Commodore Kuo and Jacoby Blunt. The terrible night when he'd led the attack on Sidorio and Jez . . . no, *not* Jez, but the thing Jez had become. The memory of that night burned in him like a fire, as hot as the torches he had sent across the water to the deck of the other ship. As consuming as the flames which had engulfed his friend . . . the *echo* of his friend . . .

"*Come on, Connor!*"

It was Grace! Even though she was back on the Vampirate ship, it *was* her voice – as clear as anything. It gave Connor the extra fortitude he needed. After everything they had been through, he could no longer be defeated by this one remaining fear – this *ridiculous* fear of heights.

Carefully, he removed his right hand from the rigging. It came away with the indentation of rope deeply imprinted, red and raw, across his palm. He realised how tightly he'd been clinging on. The ship's bell rang. The surprise of it made him lose his balance for a moment but it was only the bell announcing the changeover of shifts. He steadied himself. It was now or never. He reached up to the next square of rigging and took a deep breath.

He didn't look down. He didn't look up either. He just kept his eyes focused on his hands and the squares of rope. Each square

was the same as the last – a rope window framing a patch of sky. If he just focused on this, it was as if he wasn't climbing at all.

Suddenly, he realised that his legs were no longer shaking. Instead, they were moving steadily, seeking out the next foothold, finding their rhythm. His breathing had settled too. He was calm. He was doing this. Conquering the fear. It felt good. It felt *so* good.

He lost himself in the movement and it was only when he heard the sound of cheering from below that he realised he'd reached his goal. He looked up and his hand touched not rope but the wooden frame of the crow's nest. All that remained was to haul himself up onto the lookout point. A coldness sliced through him. There was no ignoring the sense of how high he was above the deck with no harness to protect him. It was madness to be up here at the mercy of the swell of the waves far below. Once more, an icy wave of fear tore through his insides. He gritted his teeth, waiting for it to pass. The fear clung onto him but Connor was not about to be defeated. Not now.

There was good reason to be up here. Someone had to man the crow's nest – to keep a lookout and give early warning of attack, or opportunities *to* attack! Coming up here was about protecting your mates and, in the three months since he'd joined *The Diablo*, these guys had become more than mates. Bart, Cate and Captain Wrathe were his new family. They'd never replace Grace, of course, but Grace had had to embark on her own journey. Besides her, everyone he cared about in the world was aboard this ship. When you looked at it like that, it made absolute sense to be up here, in a position to safeguard them. Effortlessly, he climbed up into the crow's nest.

As he planted his feet on the wooden platform, he heard a fresh round of cheers from below. The temptation to glance down was

strong now. Resisting it, he looked straight ahead. As far as the eye could see, there was the endless sprawl of glittering blue ocean. His new home.

In the distance, he saw the outline of a ship, silhouetted against the afternoon sun. Attached to the crow's nest was a small telescope. Connor reached for it and looked through the glass out to the horizon. It took him a moment to find the ship but then he caught it in the circle of his vision. It was a galleon, not dissimilar to *The Diablo*. A pirate ship, perhaps. He zoomed in still further and raised the telescope to get a better look at the flag. Yes, another pirate ship for sure! It seemed to be heading around the bay, the bay that could be seen curving into the horizon behind the vessel. Connor grinned. He knew *exactly* where that ship was heading. To every pirate's favourite watering hole – Ma Kettle's Tavern.

As Connor replaced the telescope in its clip, a small bird came to rest on the crow's nest. From its forked tail, Connor recognised it as a sooty tern. It gave Connor a quick glance then flapped its wings and took off again, soaring away into the blue. Connor watched the bird until it lost its distinctive shape, contracted to a black speck, then disappeared entirely. He smiled to himself. *That's my fear*, he thought. Gone now.

"Good goin,' buddy!" Bart high-fived Connor as he jumped down the last metre onto the deck.

"Very impressive," said the pirate at Bart's side. "Thanks, Gonzalez."

"No, I mean it," the pirate replied. "Half an hour to get up there and straight down in thirty seconds!" He grinned. Connor shook his head. He'd only started to know Brenden Gonzalez since Jez

Stukeley's death. Gonzalez could never take Jez's place but he shared a similarly dry sense of humour.

"I'm really proud of you!" Cate said, stepping forward and – most uncharacteristically – hugging him. "I know how hard that was for you," she whispered in his ear.

"An excellent effort!" said Captain Wrathe, beaming at him. Scrimshaw, the captain's pet snake, was coiled about his wrist, and even he seemed to be looking at Connor with fresh admiration.

"Well, gather round everyone," called Captain Wrathe. "I think Mister Tempest's accomplishment is cause for celebration, don't you?"

There was a rousing chorus of "aye, Captain!" from up and down the deck. Once more, Connor had a sense of belonging to a vast, extended ocean-faring family.

"Tonight, we shall visit an establishment by the name of Ma Kettle's!" cried Captain Wrathe.

There was much cheering. Bart and Gonzalez hoisted Connor up onto their shoulders.

"Put me down!" he cried.

"Oh, dear!" said Bart. "You haven't got a fresh attack of vertigo, have you?" He and Gonzalez laughed good and hard at that.

"No," said Connor. "Put me down! I have news for the captain."

"A likely tale!" cried Bart.

"It's true!" Connor persisted. "Put me down!"

"If you've news for the captain," cried Molucco Wrathe, "you may tell him from up there on your perch."

"All right," Connor said, still balancing on his mates' shoulders. "It's probably nothing to worry about. Just that when I was up in the crow's nest, I saw another pirate ship."

"In our sea lane?" boomed Molucco. The irony of his comment was not lost on the crew, who greeted his indignation with hearty laughter. They all knew that Captain Wrathe had little – or rather, no – respect for the system of sea lanes instigated by the Pirate Federation.

Connor nodded. "It's in our lane but I don't think it's going to cause us any bother. It looked to me like it was just taking a shortcut to Ma Kettle's."

"I see," Molucco said. He reached into his blue velvet coat and retrieved his own silver retractable telescope. He extended it fully, then raised it to one eye, closing the other eye tight. "Which direction was it coming from?" he asked.

"North-north-west," Connor said.

One eye attached to the telescope, the other still closed, Molucco swung around and narrowly missed whacking Cate in the nose. Fortunately, the deputy captain had quick reflexes.

"Ah yes! I see." He fiddled with the telescope lens. "Let me get a better look."

For a moment, the captain was silent. "Do you see it now?" Connor asked.

There was a pause and Connor was about to repeat his question, but then, the captain spoke. "Yes, lad. Yes, I see it." They could tell from his voice that something wasn't right. Cate stepped closer to the captain's side. Bart and Gonzalez eased Connor from their shoulders and returned him gently to the deck. "What's wrong, Captain?" Cate asked.

He seemed too lost in his own thoughts to answer. As if in slow motion, he dropped the telescope from his eye and compacted it once more. He looked dazed.

"The day has come," he announced.

"What do you mean?" Cate asked. "Is there something we should know about that ship?"

"You'll find out soon enough," Molucco said. "Cate, I'm going to my cabin. Make sail for Ma Kettle's."

"But, Captain," said Cate. "If there's something wrong, I'd really like to know . . ."

"Just do it," Molucco said wearily, striding away across the deck.

"What's eating him, I wonder?" Bart said, when the captain had disappeared below deck.

Cate shrugged. "Like he says, we'll find out soon enough." She sighed. "Of course, it might be nice to get a heads-up once in a while. I *am* Deputy Captain of this ship . . . in name, at least."

"Chin up, Cate," Bart said, giving her shoulder a squeeze. "Don't take it personally."

Cate lifted her hand and removed Bart's from her shoulder. "That," she said, "is a highly inappropriate," she dropped her voice "but much appreciated show of support." Smiling, she turned to address the crew. "Chop chop! Change tack for Ma Kettle's. Now!"

Connor headed off along the deck.

"Where are you going at such a stride, buddy?" Bart called after him.

"I'm going to grab a shower," Connor said. "I'm all grimy after my climb and I want to freshen up for Ma Kettle's." Bart gave him a knowing glance. "Freshen up, eh? That wouldn't be to impress any particular lady who might happen to work at Ma's, would it?" He grinned at Connor.

"Hey, are you *blushing*?"

"No!" Connor said. "I must have got sunburned up on the

crow's nest, is all."

"Aw," said Bart, "our boy sure is growing up fast!" He and Gonzalez grabbed Connor and ruffled his hair.

"Stop it!" cried Connor, breaking free from their clutches and darting inside to get ready.

It was always reassuring entering the familiar terrain of Ma Kettle's. If *The Diablo* felt like Connor's home these days, then Ma's ran a close second. Connor always felt a sense of expectation as he heard the great waterwheel sloshing overhead and made his way with his comrades across the threshold.

Connor, Bart and Gonzalez strode into the main bar. Several faces turned as they did so. Connor noticed that a couple of the serving girls gave him a smile. Blushing, he smiled back. He was still unused to the growing amount of attention he had been receiving of late. Being one of Molucco Wrathe's crew gave you instant celebrity status in the pirate world. Love Molucco or loathe him, it seemed you just couldn't help talking about him.

The bar was bustling with activity, as always. Crews from numerous pirate ships spilled out across the main bar area. Some were lucky enough to be welcomed beyond the velvet rope into the VIP area; others sought out the private curtained booths up above. Connor saw Cate standing at the bar. She gave him a wave and beckoned the three of them over to join her.

"So, did ya find out what's eating the captain?" Bart asked Cate as he, Connor and Gonzalez caught up with her.

"No." She shook her head. "No, he's barely said a word to me since he saw that ship."

"Where is he now?"

"Over there." She pointed. "No doubt telling Ma everything he doesn't see fit to tell me."

They looked over to a roped-off section of the tavern, where Molucco was sitting with Ma Kettle. She was nodding sympathetically, rubbing his shoulder with one hand and pouring him a hefty drink with the other.

"They *are* old friends," Bart said to Cate.

"Yes," Cate said, "but I'm the deputy captain. I'm supposed to know some of what's going on in his head." She sighed. "Of course, you know what this is really about, don't you? He blames me for what went down on *The Albatross*. It's fair enough. Lord knows, I blame myself."

Connor hung his head. It was hard for all of them to move on from that fateful day – from the apparently easy victory that had turned into a nightmare for them all. It was the day that had ended with the death of their friend and comrade, Jez.

"Hey," Bart said. "We were all caught unawares by that."

"Yes," Cate said. "But *I'm*—"

"We know," said Bart. "You're *Deputy Captain*!"

Cate shook her head. "I was going to say that I'm not supposed to be caught unawares by anything."

Connor could see the hurt in her face. He wished he could say something to make her feel better but he felt a little out of his depth.

"Now look," Bart said. "Young Tempest here conquered a major fear today and we're supposed to be celebrating. So can we all put a smile on our faces and get a bit merry?"

"Amen to that," said Gonzalez, grabbing some drinks from a passing serving girl.

"My but you're pretty!" Gonzalez said. "Are you new?" The

girl blushed, shook her head and continued on her way. Bart laughed. "That's little Jenny, you drongo," he said. "Haven't you seen her before?"

"Can't say I have," Gonzalez said, "but I'll be looking out for her now! Little Jenny!"

Hearing her name, the girl glanced over her shoulder. Gonzalez raised his tankard in salute. "Ah, she's like a little angel, that one."

Bart shook his head with a smirk. Cate came over to Connor. "I'm sorry about before," she said. "You did good today and you deserve a celebration."

"It's OK," Connor said. "I know things aren't easy for you."

"No," Cate said, "but those are my problems and I shouldn't have bothered you with them."

"Yes, you should," Connor said. "You might be Deputy Captain but, first and foremost, you're our friend."

Just then, there was a loud cry across the tavern. "Molucco Wrathe!"

Connor, Bart, Cate and Gonzalez turned. Across the room, they saw Molucco and Ma freeze, looking slowly round. The voice boomed across the room again.

"Molucco Wrathe!"

A tall, imposing man strode across the room into the centre of the light. A striking woman and gangling boy followed some steps behind. Connor could tell by the man's clothing he was a captain. There was something strangely familiar about him.

"So *that's* why the captain was all worked up!" exclaimed Cate.

"What do you mean?" Connor asked. "Who is that?"

"That's Barbarro Wrathe," Bart said. "Molucco's brother."

CHAPTER TWO

THE EXPEDITION PARTY

The chill night air licked the deck of *The Nocturne* as the galleon rested in the waters of a small cove at the foot of a vast mountain. So vast was this peak that it was impossible to see just how far it stretched into the air, however much Grace Tempest strained her neck backwards to look. It didn't help, of course, that it was pitch-black, save for the sliver of moonlight which fell unhelpfully across the other side of the deck. To most ordinary people, it would seem incredibly foolhardy to embark on an expedition up icy, unknown mountain passes in the middle of the night, but, Grace reminded herself, not one of the people embarking on this expedition could be termed "ordinary". Indeed, some would say it was stretching things to even describe her travelling companions as "people".

As she leaned backwards in vain, Grace felt the woollen beret slipping from her head. Feeling an immediate resulting chill, she pushed the hat back into position and resumed an upright

position. The beret, like the rest of her outer clothes, had been loaned to her by her friend Darcy Flotsam, who now stood beside her on the deck.

"Are you sure you're warm enough, Grace dear?" she inquired. "I could easily pop back into my cabin and fetch you one of my furs. Just say the word!"

Grace shook her head. "I told you before, Darcy. I won't wear fur. No animal should have to die to keep me warm." Darcy shook her head in disbelief. "But it's so soft and toasty! It's not like the poor fox what made my coat is about to spring to life again any time soon. So where's the harm, eh?"

"No, Darcy," Grace said, firmly. "Not under any circumstances. This coat is quite warm enough, thank you." Darcy smiled at Grace as they waited for the others. "I so wish I was coming with you," she said. "I don't think I'd enjoy the climb, it's true, but I'd do it to stay close to you and Lieutenant Furey."

"I know, Darcy, and Lorcan does too." Grace smiled at her companion. "But the captain seems to think that the less of us leave the ship the better."

They both looked towards the closed door of the captain's quarters. Inside, he was briefing his deputies on how to manage the ship during his absence.

"It's *very* rare for the captain to leave the ship," said Darcy, turning back to Grace. "It shows how much he cares for Lieutenant Furey that he would take this risk."

Risk? Grace hadn't thought of it in those terms before but now, she realised that with the recent turmoil on the ship and the rebellions following Sidorio's departure, it would indeed be a risk for the captain to leave the other Vampirates for even a few

days. Sidorio had questioned the rules of the ship, in particular the captain's limiting of blood-taking to the weekly Feast Night. Though Sidorio had been banished and was now gone, he had left the seeds of discontent behind him. Others amongst the previously compliant crew were now asking why *they* could not take blood more often. Grace knew that the captain had exiled three more of the crew since Sidorio had left. They had joined up with the renegade Vampirate and embarked on a terrible spree of wanton bloodshed until they had all been destroyed – by her brother, Connor. Connor the hero.

It was strange to think of her twin in such a way. So much had happened to them both in the few short months since their father had died and they had left their home in Crescent Moon Bay. How naïve they had been then, thought Grace. They had thought that leaving would offer them an escape route. In some ways, it had, but their journey had thrown them both into dangerous situations, where their very lives were under threat. Now, Connor was, to his sister's great discomfort, a pirate warrior aboard the notorious ship *The Diablo*. Perhaps to her brother's even greater alarm, Grace was a regular passenger aboard the ship of vampire pirates, or Vampirates, called *The Nocturne*. Both brother and sister yearned for the other twin to see sense and join them – to see that *their* choice of ship was the right one – but it was a tribute to their relationship that they had lately come to the understanding that each must go their own way, for now at least.

So, here she was, on the deck of *The Nocturne*, awaiting the captain and her dear comrade Lorcan, about to embark on an important mission to the top of the mountain and a mysterious place called Sanctuary. There, they would meet the Vampirate guru,

Mosh Zu Kamal, and appeal to him to cure Lorcan of his blindness.

Glancing up towards the mountain, Grace wondered just how long it would take to reach Sanctuary. It might prove to be a very arduous trek indeed. Already, she was concerned about how Lorcan would manage. It was not just a question of his blindness but the fact that he had recently grown so weak. Why, just a few days earlier, it had been effort enough just to get him up onto the top deck.

"My business is concluded." She heard a familiar whisper, and saw a new figure emerge onto the deck. Clad from head to toe in black, it was as if he had been sculpted out of the dark night itself. Others would be perturbed by the sight of this tall, imposing man with his leathery cape, which sometimes flickered with veins of light, like the winged sails of the Vampirate ship. They would be intimidated by the fact that he always wore a mask and never removed his hands from their dark gloves. Some might recoil at his voice, which did not go out into the air, as other voices do but instead, arrived in your head as an icy whisper, never varying in volume or pitch.

In her relatively short acquaintance with the Vampirate captain, Grace had come to know him as a wise and compassionate being – more humane than anyone she had ever met before, save perhaps her dear departed father. In a way, she realised, she had come to view the captain as a father figure.

"Let us go." Once more, the captain's words arrived in her head.

As the captain walked towards them, Darcy suddenly threw her arms about Grace's shoulders. "Oh, Grace," she said with a sob, "we always seem to be saying goodbye, don't we?"

Grace nodded, smiling. She was a little surprised to feel a tear roll down her cheek. Sometimes, she forgot just what a good friend

Darcy Flotsam had become to her. It was no longer sufficient to think of her as the ship's quirky but beautiful figurehead; a wooden sculpture by day but a girl full of life by night. Darcy was as much flesh and blood and emotion as anyone Grace had ever met.

Grace wiped away the tear. "I'll be back soon, Darcy," she said. "I promise. Just as soon as Lorcan is on the mend, we'll return to *The Nocturne*."

Darcy nodded. They hugged once more and repeated their farewells, both hanging onto the pretence that Lorcan was sure to recover. Neither could bear to even entertain the alternative.

The captain gently leaned forward. "Goodbye for now, Darcy," he whispered, laying a gloved hand on her shoulder. "I know I can depend on you to obey the deputy and do your best for the good of the ship."

"Yes, Captain!" Darcy exclaimed, giving him a crisp naval salute.

Watching them, Grace pondered the word "deputy". She realised that she had no idea who the captain had left in charge of *The Nocturne* during his absence. She was aware of a certain hierarchy aboard the ship – Lorcan, for instance, now held the post of Lieutenant, as Sidorio had before him – but she had no clue as to who the deputy captain was or even who might be of senior rank amongst the crew. This was in marked contrast to her time aboard the pirate ship, *The Diablo*, where it had been crystal clear that the deputy captain was first Cheng Li and latterly Cutlass Cate. Grace was reminded that, in spite of her already deep attachment to several of the crew of *The Nocturne*, there was still much she had to learn about the Vampirates. Perhaps her time at Sanctuary would give her more of an insight. She fervently hoped so.

"Ah," said the captain, his whisper cutting through her thoughts. "Here come the final members of our expedition party."

He nodded as Lorcan made his way out onto the deck. He was dressed in a heavy, army greatcoat he had borrowed from another member of the crew. A medal still hung over the front of the chest. It looked rather good, thought Grace, wondering which conflict it commemorated and what noble and violent deeds had secured the honour. With his military boots, Lorcan cut a dashing figure. On his back was a small kitbag, filled with a few articles to make his stay at Sanctuary more comfortable. Across his eyes was the fresh bandage Grace had helped to apply earlier. It obscured the livid burns, with which she was now all too familiar, and shone dove-white in the moonlight.

Lorcan was not alone, however. Beside him strode Shanti, his beautiful but vicious donor. Her high-heeled boots drummed on the wooden deck and she gripped a vanity case in a small, suede-gloved hand. So, she was coming along with them too, thought Grace. It made sense. If Lorcan was to fully recover then he'd have to start taking blood again. Shanti was his given donor and he'd need her close at hand when the time came. Shanti, Grace now noticed, was wearing a matching fur coat and pillar- box hat. She didn't need to think very hard to realise where *that* outfit had been procured.

Darcy's face flushed red at Grace's stare. Grace shook her head. Darcy was such a generous soul – but how typical it was of Shanti not to give a thought to what dead creature she might be wearing. The most annoying thing of all, though, thought Grace, was that Shanti looked so pretty in the outfit.

As the new arrivals reached the group, Grace and Shanti exchanged strained smiles. There was no love lost between the

two and clearly neither could quite hide the displeasure they felt in travelling together. Close up, Grace noticed how much older Shanti looked, even from the last time she had seen her. She was still beautiful, there was no question about that. In some ways, she was *more* beautiful, as lines wove their way about her eyes and lips. This made her beauty seem more fragile and therefore more precious. To Shanti, however, the lines were abhorrent. The donors were only immortal whilst their given Vampirate was sharing their blood. As soon as this stopped, mortality wasted no time in reclaiming the donor's body. Since Lorcan had ceased sharing with her, Shanti had begun to age at an alarming rate. If he did not start taking her blood again soon, she would be in severe danger. She too might be growing weak. Grace shook her head. What an unlikely expedition party they were, she thought, looking from one face to another.

"Come on," said the captain. "Let's not waste any more time. Sanctuary and Mosh Zu await us. Come, my friends."

"Goodbye, dear Lieutenant Furey," Darcy said, hugging Lorcan tightly. "I wish you the most speedy recovery."

"Thanks, Darcy," said Lorcan, warmly. "You be a good girl while I'm away, you hear me?"

Grace was pleased that he had managed to muster some of his old cheek. That had been missing for too long. Shanti looked displeased, her lips pursed tightly. She was, Grace had noticed, remarkably possessive of Lorcan. She looped a fur-wrapped arm through the sleeve of his greatcoat. Grace lifted her own small pack onto her back, then took Lorcan's other arm. They followed the captain gingerly down the gangplank and onto land.

Behind them, mist rose from the dark waters, stealing its way

gently but firmly up the sides of the ship. Darcy stood on the deck, waving to the departing travellers until the very last. The mist drew a curtain between them and *The Nocturne*, and disappeared from sight.

"Now, a new journey begins," announced the captain.

Grace nodded. She wanted to say something enthusiastic, to generate some positive energy amongst the group, but catching sight of Lorcan's downturned mouth and Shanti's cold, sharp eyes, she could see exactly what they were both thinking. This might be their final journey. If Sanctuary and the mysterious Mosh Zu Kamal couldn't heal Lorcan, there was no further hope for either of them.

CHAPTER THREE

BROTHERS

The whole tavern fell silent as Barbarro Wrathe – flanked by his two companions – appeared at the top of the steps leading down into the main part of the bar. The woman and boy lingered on the top step as Barbarro continued his journey alone. In his hand was a cane, its head a bulbous skull with a jewelled snake emerging from one eye socket and spiralling down the length of the stick. The cane beat out Barbarro's steady progress towards his brother.

As he reached the main floor, revellers on all sides moved swiftly away – whether out of fear or respect, Connor could not be sure. Barbarro's cane echoed against the floor. There were low murmurs. Connor watched and listened intently. He knew that there was an old grievance between the two brothers. Had Barbarro come back to settle a score? His face gave nothing away.

The person who seemed the least surprised – and the least perturbed – by Barbarro's arrival, was Molucco himself but,

of course, Molucco had known that it was Barbarro's ship making its way to Ma Kettle's. He had been shaken when he'd first seen it from the deck of *The Diablo* but, in the intervening time, he had composed himself. Now, he calmly took a last draught of his drink, then rose up and stepped down from the booth where he and Ma Kettle were ensconced.

"Barbarro!" he boomed at full volume. "What a wonderful surprise!"

Barbarro did not respond but stood, waiting for Molucco, in the centre of the room. It made Connor think of two jungle cats taking the measure of one another – a real power play.

As the two brothers at last came face to face, Connor was struck by the strong resemblance between the pair. They were not quite the mirror image of one another but you could certainly see they were cut from the same, flamboyant cloth.

Barbarro was just a little broader and taller than Molucco. Dressed in a bottle-green frockcoat with gold braiding and tall boots, he cut a similarly dashing figure. His hands, however, were devoid of jewels – save for a gold wedding band. Barbarro wore his hair long like Molucco's but it was still a glossy black, with a thick streak of silver-grey adding both glamour and gravitas. He had a neatly cropped beard and moustache. His twinkling eyes were the perfect reflection of his brother's. Just when you thought you knew which colour they were, it shifted. First green, then blue; purple, brown and then black. They were as changeable as the surface of the ocean.

"It's been a long time," Molucco said. All eyes in the tavern were upon him as he spoke. Then, they moved hungrily to Barbarro to gauge the response.

"Too long, Molucco," said Barbarro, his voice as sonorous as his brother's, "since last we met, I have lost one brother. I do not intend to lose another."

Now, he extended his arms and Molucco stepped forward to embrace him. There was a chorus of sighs around the room as the men hugged. It appeared that the long-running feud was over. At least, thought Connor, *something* good had come from the terrible murder of Porfirio Wrathe.

As the two Captains Wrathe at last disentangled themselves, Connor saw Scrimshaw emerge from Molucco's hair and extend himself expectantly towards Barbarro. Connor had noticed how Scrimshaw often seemed to scrutinise people, as if on Captain Wrathe's behalf, but this was something different. Suddenly, he noticed a reciprocal movement amidst Barbarro's dark locks, and a second snake pushed its way through and extended itself towards Scrimshaw.

Barbarro glanced up with a smile. "It seems Skirmish is pleased to see his own brother."

"Yes," nodded Molucco gravely, "I venture he's missed him terribly these last few years." The snakes hissed conspiratorially together for a moment, then settled around their masters' necks, where they could keep an eye on one another.

There was a ripple of laughter around the tavern. It served as an escape valve after the high tension of Barbarro's arrival. Connor took advantage of the break from silence to give Bart a nudge. "You didn't tell me Scrimshaw had a brother," he said.

Bart grinned. "I have to keep *some* surprises up my sleeve," he said.

As they spoke, the tall woman behind Barbarro stepped

forward. She walked gracefully and was dressed in a regal coat, the same pale gold as the hair swept up onto her head.

"That's Barbarro's wife," Bart hissed. "Trofie!" exclaimed Molucco.

"Did he say *Trophy*?" Connor asked. "That's an odd name."

"It's *Trofie* – F-I-E. Scandinavian, I think," Bart said. "She's a lot younger than Barbarro," Connor said. "Yes, I think this face suits her."

"What do you mean, *this* face?"

"Let's just say it changes from time to time," Bart said. "Snip, snip . . . if you know what I mean."

Trofie extended her right hand. It glowed as golden as the rest of her, all except for her ruby-red fingernails. Connor watched as Molucco bowed before his sister-in-law and kissed her hand. This didn't seem to entirely please her for, as Molucco stood up again, she reached into a pocket, pulled out a small handkerchief and wiped her hand. As she did so, Connor was surprised to see the light bounce off it. Looking more closely, he saw that Trofie's right hand was made of metal. It was literally as gold as her hair and what he had taken for red varnished nails were, in fact, actual rubies. He had never seen anything like it.

"What's with her hand?" he asked Bart.

"Ah, yes," said Bart. "There are conflicting stories about that. The official version is that Trofie was captured and held hostage by one of Barbarro's rivals. He threatened to cut off her fingers unless she revealed the location of Barbarro's secret treasure cache. Story goes that Trofie kept her silence for five days. Every day, they chopped off one of her fingers. On the sixth day, Barbarro rescued her, killed her captors and took her to a surgeon who reconstructed her hand out of gold."

"Wow!" said Connor. "That's amazing." It made him sick to think of such wanton violence. "So what's the *un*official version?"

"Well," said Bart. "Trofie Wrathe likes a jewel or two and Barbarro Wrathe believes in treating her to whatever her heart desires. Rumour has it that she got to the point where she had so many rings she literally couldn't lift her hand. In the end it was a choice between her rings and her fingers."

"And she chose . . .?"

"She had her actual hand removed – apparently it's in safekeeping in formaldehyde somewhere in case she ever wants it back – and then had her rings melted down to create this new gold hand."

"Wow!" Connor said again. "Which version do you think is the truth?"

Bart shook his head. "Search me," he said. "Chances are, we'll never know. I certainly wouldn't dare ask her. She scares me." Bart shivered.

Connor turned his full attention back to Trofie. "I'm very sorry for your loss," he heard Trofie say to Molucco. Her voice was icily precise.

"Madam," answered Molucco. "The death of Porfirio Wrathe was a devastating loss to us all. To the whole world of piracy, in fact."

Trofie nodded. Then, she looked back over her shoulder. Connor saw she was beckoning to the lanky boy who had come in with them. "Moonshine, come and say hello to your uncle."

The boy rolled his eyes and ambled forward. He was dressed casually in black drainpipe jeans and a leather biker jacket. "Uncle Luck," he said. "How's it hanging?"

Trofie dug a golden finger into his ribs. "Ow!" he moaned. "That hurt!"

"Show your uncle some respect!" she said.

Molucco beamed. "No need for formality where family is concerned," he said. "Why, Moonshine, you've certainly had a growth spurt since last we saw you. You're as tall and thin as a mast."

Moonshine looked faintly displeased with this remark but then, thought Connor, he had the kind of face that looked faintly displeased, period. It wasn't helped by the smattering of acne on his cheeks or the livid purple scar that crossed one cheekbone.

Suddenly, as if becoming aware he was being watched, Moonshine glanced in Connor and Bart's direction. As his eyes met theirs, his face froze. The look he gave Connor and Bart was venomous. Where had *that* come from, Connor wondered?

"Connor!" Molucco called. "Cate! Come and meet my family."

Connor and Cate crossed the floor.

"This is our Deputy Captain," said Molucco. "Cate, you've met Barbarro and Trofie before."

Cate nodded, bowing before them.

"I don't think you've ever met their boy, Moonshine. The three of *you* have yet to meet Connor Tempest," Molucco said, reaching out an arm and pulling Connor towards him. "Connor's the newest member of my crew. He's only been with us these past three months but it's hard to imagine a time without him. Why, he's become like a son to me."

Connor blushed at Captain Wrathe's fulsome praise. Once more, he was struck by the captain's generosity of spirit.

"A son, eh?" said Barbarro, shaking Connor's hand. "That's high praise indeed from my brother. Connor. This is my wife and Deputy Captain, Trofie."

Connor waited nervously to see if she would extend her real hand or the golden one. It was the gold one which moved towards

him. As he took it in his own hand, he felt something akin to an electric shock. It was as smooth and almost as supple as flesh, but it was ice cold.

Trofie gave a small smile. "Hello, *min elskling*," she said. "We've heard about you."

"Really?" Connor said, surprised.

"Oh, yes," Trofie said, her face still holding the smile. "We're very well informed."

"This is Moonshine," said Barbarro. "Say hello to Connor, Moonshine."

Moonshine surveyed Connor for a moment, giving the clear message he'd as much like to shake hands with a pile of his own vomit. At last, there being no clear alternative, he extended his hand to Connor's. Connor noticed the blackened, chewed fingernails. They looked somehow familiar but he didn't know why. He and Moonshine shook hands very briefly. Moonshine's hands were as cold as his mother's but clammier.

"How old are you, Connor?" Barbarro asked. "Fourteen, sir."

"Fourteen? Why, just the same as our Moonshine! Looks like you're set to be firm friends," said Barbarro, evidently blind to the looks of disgust now emanating from both mother and son. Connor saw that Trofie had wrapped her metal hand about her son's waist. The ruby "nails" glistened. "Well," Ma Kettle said, taking charge. "You've all got much to catch up on! Come and sit up here and we'll uncork a bottle of oyster champagne to mark this auspicious occasion." She ushered Molucco, Barbarro and Trofie into the booth where she and Molucco had been sitting before. "Not you young men, though," she said, firmly grasping Connor in one hand and Moonshine in the other. "You too,

Bart," she called across the room. "You boys are going to check out my newest attraction."

"We are?" said Connor.

"Oh yes," said Ma, "you are!" She called over her shoulder. "Sugar Pie! Is the band ready?"

"Yes, Ma!" came a familiar cry.

The cry was followed by the appearance of Sugar Pie, Ma Kettle's beautiful assistant.

"Connor! Bart! It's been a while. How are you both?" Sugar Pie kissed them each lightly on the cheek. Connor vowed not to wash it for a couple of days. Speechless, he beamed from ear to ear.

"This is Moonshine Wrathe," Ma Kettle said to Sugar Pie. "Molucco's nephew."

Moonshine leaned in his cheek for Sugar Pie to kiss but she took one look at his pockmarked face and gave it a quick pat with her hand.

"So, have you seen the dance floor?" she said, spinning around. They hadn't noticed it before but now Connor saw that Ma had changed around the layout of the bar. The section beneath the gallery of curtained booths was now a dance floor. It was made up of glass squares, like a chessboard, under which coloured lights pulsed in time to the music.

"I assume you know how to tango," Sugar Pie said. "Absolutely," Moonshine replied, puffing up his unimpressive chest.

"Excellent! Then you'll partner Kat," said Sugar Pie, pushing him towards the dance floor where a tall, dark- haired girl was waiting. "You, Bartholomew," she said, "you shall partner Elisa." Grinning, Bart strode out across the floor and took his dance partner in his arms.

"Connor," Sugar Pie said, taking his hand, "you shall partner me."

The musicians played a small overture as she led him onto the dance floor.

"Erm, the thing is, I really don't know how to tango," Connor stammered.

"That's why you've got *me* as your partner," said Sugar Pie. "I'll lead. All you have to do is cling on tight and let me do the rest."

"But I thought the man was supposed to lead," said Connor.

"Ha!" Sugar Pie laughed. "Not on *this* dance floor!"

Suddenly the tango music began in earnest and Connor was swept across the floor.

"That's it," Sugar Pie said. "Just hold on tight and don't let go!"

Connor realised he had little option as she dragged him along the floor. He had fleeting glimpses of the others as they passed, like speeding light boats cresting the surface of the sea. Bart winked at him as he elaborately dipped Elisa until her tousled hair was skimming the floor.

"Focus!" Sugar Pie instructed, pulling Connor's face sharply towards hers and staring at him with her disarmingly blue eyes. "That's better!" It did not surprise him that when the time came, it was she who dipped him, his head and shoulders falling backwards until he was looking up at the velvet curtains of the booths overhead. They were all tightly closed.

"Excellent!" Sugar Pie cried, pulling him upright again. "You're really getting the hang of this."

Dazed, Connor found himself being marched back across the floor. Now, he could see Moonshine, dragging Kat along in a rather brutal fashion. In everything he did, Moonshine seemed

to express unknown depths of anger. Twisting Kat around, Moonshine gazed directly into Connor's eyes.

The music came to a crescendo and Connor was left facing a look of pure hatred coming from Moonshine Wrathe. Connor frowned. How could you hate someone you'd only just met? He had a bad feeling about Moonshine's arrival. Barbarro might have come to heal old wounds but judging by the expression on Moonshine's face, a new feud might already be starting. Connor couldn't understand where the boy's animosity had come from, but this was going to end badly, he could feel it.

CHAPTER FOUR

DARK JOURNEY

As the mist cleared, Grace saw only empty ocean. *The Nocturne* had disappeared. She felt a shiver along her spine. There was no going back now. Glancing first at the captain, then at Lorcan and Shanti, she wondered what challenges lay ahead for each of them before they next returned to the ship.

"*Now* what do we do?" asked Shanti.

"It's really very simple," the captain said. "Now, we climb the mountain."

"Well *yes*, but where are our mules? And lights? Surely, they've sent someone to guide us and carry our bags?"

Grace hated to find herself in agreement with Shanti but she felt these were all fair points. Nevertheless, it came as little surprise to hear the captain's whisper. "We'll make our own way. Everyone makes their own way to Sanctuary."

Shanti struggled to take this in. "But how? It's pitch-black.

We can't. We don't even have a map, do we? My shoes . . .