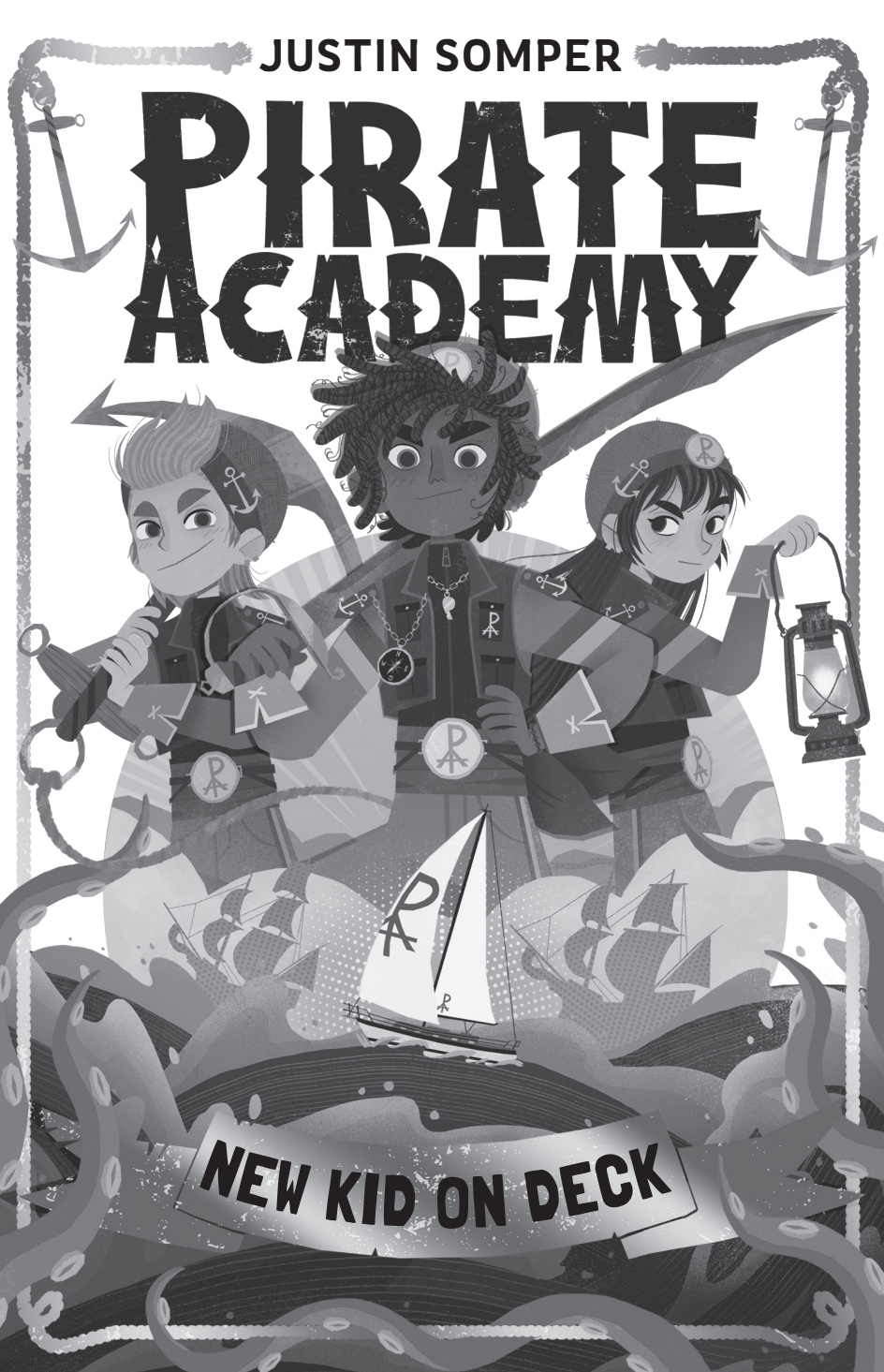

JUSTIN SOMPER
PIRATE ACADEMY
NEW KID ON DECK

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for Dan Dewhirst,
the OG Jacoby.

It is the year 2507. The world is a very different place to what it used to be. Ocean levels have risen, causing the shape of the world to change. There is a lot less land and a lot more ocean. A new golden age of piracy has arrived. Everyone knows that piracy offers the best chance of a dazzling future. The oceans are now under the tight control of the Pirate Federation – a worldwide organisation of leading pirate captains. The Pirate Federation also runs nine schools around the world. Each Pirate Academy admits only fifteen students each year.

These students are the young hopes of the ocean's fiercest pirate families. They are sent to Pirate Academy to receive ten years of training at the hands of the world's greatest pirate captains. Upon graduation, the young apprentices will be ready to sail forth as Captains and Deputies, in the hope of bringing fresh success to their families, fleets and empires.

PIRATE ACADEMY, CORAL SEA PROVINCE –

TEMPORARY VISITOR PERMIT

Ref: OCE8N23

Great news! You have been granted a rare visitor permit to spend a short time at Pirate Academy, Coral Sea Province.

We trust you will find your visit here informative and inspiring. Maybe it will even encourage you to pursue piracy as your own career choice. Wouldn't that be wonderful?

By entering this protected zone, you agree not to share any of the secrets you uncover here. Always remember . . . what happens at Pirate Academy stays at Pirate Academy!

Signed: *Captain Mayday Salt*

on behalf of the Pirate Federation.

AUTHORIZED

CHAPTER 1
SWASHBUCKLE HILL

Jasmine Peacock sat on a bench, beneath a tall Flame Tree, at the top of Swashbuckle Hill.

Swashbuckle Hill was the highest point of Pirate Academy's lush sweep of gardens. According to school legend, the hill had been given its name by the first students to step foot inside Pirate Academy, thirteen years ago.

It was strange to think that the Academy was only thirteen years old. *Only two years older than me*, Jasmine thought. She had arrived here when she was seven-years-old. Pirate Academy was so much more than her school – it was her second home. She knew that the feeling was shared by every one of her classmates. There were just fifteen students in each year, drawn from the most famous and successful pirate families. It was tough to get a place here, and you had to work hard to keep it. Jasmine felt proud to be an Academy student.

The young students of Barracuda Class were bathed in golden light from the rays of the setting sun. All eyes were locked on the harbour below, where flaming torches had been lit to mark the entrance to the school. Tonight was a very special night for Barracuda Class. It was Captains' Evening, which began with all of their parents sailing their ships to Skullhead Rock, ten nautical miles away, then racing against each other to the finish at the Academy harbour.

"Feeling confident?" came a familiar voice at Jasmine's ear. "The Peacocks always come in first, right?"

Jasmine smiled as her friend Jacoby Blunt sat down beside her.

"We'll see," she said.

"We shall indeed!" Jacoby's legs drummed excitedly on the ground. He turned away from Jasmine to beckon over his roommate. "Wing! *Wing!* Come over here! It's starting!"

Wing waved and jogged over to join his friends.

"What's the emergency, Blunt?"

"Take a look yourself," Jacoby answered. "I think you're about to win!"

Wing's eyes zeroed in on the harbour as the first ship sailed into view. It was a very fine ship with ten sails,

its main mast over fifty feet tall. And, of course, a skull-and-crossbones flag flew high on top, flapping in the evening breeze.

"Go Mum!" Wing cried, fist-pumping the air. A chorus of groans came from his classmates.

"Bad luck, Jasmine!" Jacoby said. "It's a Moon victory tonight."

Jasmine shrugged. She was pleased for Wing. She saw how proudly he watched *The Enigma*, the glorious ship captained by Raven Moon, slide into dock.

"I told Dad it was our turn to win!" moaned Cosmo. His family ran one of the most powerful pirate fleets in the Pacific.

"Not this time!" Ocean's voice was as icy as her pale blue eyes. Her family already dominated the Arctic and had big plans for future growth.

Jacoby's attention had moved on. "Oh my days!" he exclaimed, jumping up and down. "It looks like Wing's getting *second place*, too!"

"Of course he is." Ocean marched over to Wing's side, nudging her friend fondly. "They always work so well together. Wing, you're so lucky having two mothers!"

Wing smiled. "You might not say that if you spent time on one of our ships!" Despite his words, he swelled

with pride as he watched *The Conundrum*, captained by Cressida Moon, sweep smoothly into harbour. Few pirates could dock a one hundred-and-fifty-foot pirate ship with such ease and flair.

"Go Mama!" Wing fist-pumped the air again.

"Off you go then," Jacoby said, pushing him forward. It was part of the tradition to race down to meet your parents' ship.

"You're so bossy!" Wing said, running off.

"Yes!" Jasmine called after him. "A hundred per cent bossy."

"Stop ganging up on me," Jacoby cried. "By the way, Jasmine, you must be a little crushed? Unusual for the Peacocks not to take first or second place." Before she could even answer, he had turned to Cosmo. "What about you? Reckon your lot might come in third?"

Cosmo shrugged. "It's hard to get excited about *third* place."

Ocean rolled her eyes. "You *would* say that!"

"Does it really matter?" Jasmine said, trying to break up the argument.

"Of course, it matters!" Cosmo insisted.

"It's just a silly competition," Jasmine went on. "Isn't life here at Pirate Academy tough enough, without

them thinking up new ways for us to beat each other?"

"Good point, roomie," Ocean nodded.

Jacoby shook his head. "That's a bit rich, Jasmine," he said. "Considering you always need to be the best at everything."

"Not *always*," Jasmine replied. "Not everything."

"Life's a competition," Cosmo announced grandly. "There's only so much ocean to go around."

Ocean turned to raise an eyebrow in his direction.

"I'm not talking about *you*," Cosmo said. "I'm talking about *that*." He pointed out, past the harbour, to the deep, churning waters that lay beyond.

For a moment, they were all silent as they gazed out at the inky sea. Jasmine found herself trembling and wondered if the others felt it too. The sea could seem so perfectly calm one moment, then suddenly show its wild power to you the next. All their families had built their fame and fortunes out on the oceans. In just a few years' time, she and her friends would follow, putting to the test every lesson they had learnt at Pirate Academy. You might fool yourself into thinking you could command the ocean, but it would be a dangerous mistake to make.

Watching the rough waves, Jasmine's thoughts returned to her parents and their ship, *The Blue Marlin*.



Jacoby was right. The Peacocks *did* usually arrive first. What had happened to delay them tonight?

She glanced over at Leif. She envied him the fact that his mum, Captain Larsen, was one of the teachers here at the Academy. Although Leif had joined the others up on the hill to watch, he didn't need to wait for his family's ship to arrive. He already knew where his mum was. He knew that she was safe.

"I don't believe it!" Cosmo groaned, one hand on his head, the other pointing down to the harbour.



"Blimey! Neither do I!" Jacoby exclaimed, beaming from ear to ear, as his parents' ship *The North Star* sailed into view, its ten sails and rigging shining like bronze in the setting sun.

"Off you go, then," Cosmo sighed, giving Jacoby a shove.

Jasmine watched enviously as Jacoby jogged downhill to meet his dad. She was starting to wonder if something *had* gone seriously wrong aboard *The Blue Marlin*. She had a queasy feeling in her gut.

The others were already busily arguing over whose ship

would arrive next. Walking away from them, she found another tall Flame Tree to lean her back against. She closed her eyes and took some breaths of the sweet air, trying to calm herself.

Opening her eyes after a few moments, Jasmine saw Ocean and Cosmo now racing down the hill to meet their families. It seemed that their ships had arrived within a whisper of each other.

Jasmine shook her head. The sky was darker now. It was one thing for *The Blue Marlin* not to have been the first ship to arrive – or even the second or the third. But tonight, it had been beaten into dock by five other ships *already*. Jasmine tried to tell herself that there was no need to fret. The night air was still warm. So why was she unable to stop shivering?

CHAPTER 2
NOWHERE BOY

The boy stood on the burning deck. At least, it was easy to imagine that the deck *was* burning, as the setting sun turned the light from pale gold to the deep orange of flames.

He was alone on the deck of the old "Scavenger". It was a small sailing ship which had seen better days. Nowadays, it was mostly used to trawl for any bits and pieces washed into the shallows. The stuff nobody wanted anymore. Like him.

The boy had a pair of binoculars pressed tight against his eyes. He was watching the arrival of the fine pirate ships in the distant harbour. Seeing a flicker of movement, he raised the binoculars to see the sprawl of buildings that crept up the hill and people racing down it. Even through his binoculars, they looked like ants.

He felt rough hands grab him by his collar, giving him a start. He had been watching the harbour and

the hill so intently, he hadn't heard the telltale footsteps. Now, he could identify his attacker from his rotten breath alone. As his binoculars fell, he found himself looking into a red face, with angry eyes and a largely toothless mouth.

"I thought we agreed you'd stay below decks until I gave you the all-clear."

The boy's eyes narrowed. "I was bored. We've been travelling for so long and I know every inch of that cabin . . . not that there *are* many inches to get to know."

The man spat – something yellowish-green dripping slowly down from his blistered lips to the deck below – then shook his head. "You ungrateful so-and-so. There's many a lad of your age and position in life who'd be mighty thankful for a cabin to call his own and fish-scale broth for his supper."

"A cabin barely a metre from port to starboard? It's more like a dog cage! As for your vile—"

Before he could finish, he was grabbed roughly again, this time one hand gripping his collar, the other tugging his left ear. In this painful position, he was dragged over to the very edge of the foredeck.

He knew there was no point in struggling. This thug was three times his size and packed with muscle.

The muscled thug yanked the boy up and over the edge of the deck, so that he seemed to be flying over the side. He felt queasy – not for the first time that night. Was this how it was going to end – dropped into the icy water, in the darkening night, having to swim for it? He wasn't the strongest swimmer. He wasn't the strongest anything.

For a moment, the boy froze in mid-air and was floating above the ocean. Then his eyes locked on the churning waters below, and he felt a familiar taste rise from his guts. Bile. He felt his insides heave and his body twist.

"Not again!" cried the voice at his side.

The boy puked out the last remains of food in his stomach.

"Disgusting!" exclaimed the man, quickly dropping him down on the deck.

The boy fell in a heap, noticing with a flicker of pleasure the spatter of porridge-like globs on the man's hefty boots.

"I've had it with you!" the man said, marching over to grab a bucket of water. "As far as I'm concerned, you can swim to the Academy harbour and take your chances with the bullsharks. I'm pulling up anchor and shipping out."

"No!" The boy spoke with such power that it stopped the man in his tracks. He simply stood there, bucket poised in mid-air, eyes and mouth wide open.

"No," the boy repeated. "You were paid a good amount to take me to the Pirate Academy. And that's exactly what you're going to do."

The man's face was set in a horrible sneer. He tipped over the contents of the bucket and a torrent of ocean-water swept over his boots and sent the remains of vomit downstream in the boy's direction.

"You talk big for a boy from nowhere," he said, his tone becoming menacing. "But you can't make me do anything I don't want to. I comes and I goes as I please. Ever have, ever will."

The boy shook his head and folded his arms. He thought of his mother. Though this made him sad, it also made him strong.

"You *will* take me to the Academy," he said, fresh steel in his voice. "And if you don't – you disgusting excuse for a pirate – you'll have the Pirate Federation to answer to."

As he finished speaking, the boy lifted his eyes from the vile man before him and took in the whole of the deck. The light had shifted again. Where before, it had been the burning orange of fire, now the deck was stained the ruby red of blood. This made him smile.