

Opening extract from

Blood Fever

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The Magyar

Amy Goodenough was the luckiest girl alive. Here she was, in the Mediterranean, on her father's beautiful yacht, when she should have been at school.

It was a glorious day. Apart from a long black smudge of smoke to the south, the sky was a deep, unbroken blue. She tilted her face up to catch the warmth of the sun, breathed in slowly and smiled. Really, she had no right to be here. A fire had destroyed several of the buildings at her school and it had been forced to close early for the summer. Many of the other girls had been hurriedly packed off to other schools to finish the term, but not Amy. She had easily persuaded her father to let her join him on his annual spring cruise around the Greek islands, on condition that a personal tutor came with them. Since Amy's mother had died of scarlet fever two years ago her father had been very lonely, and he was glad of his daughter's company.

Amy spent the mornings below decks with her tutor, Grace Wainwright, and the rest of the time was hers to enjoy. Grace, a serious and slightly nervous young woman from Leeds, had been strict at first, but the gentle lapping

of the water against the hull and the warm scented air of the Greek islands had soon worked their magic on her. With each day the lessons grew shorter, the worry lines on Grace's face softened and the light shone more brightly in her eyes.

This morning they had finished lessons at eleven o'clock. Grace had sighed and pushed away the book of French grammar they had been struggling over, then stared longingly out through a porthole at a perfect disc of blue sky.

'That's it for today,' she had said. 'Don't tell your father.'

Amy stepped up on to the bulwark and peered into the water. It was rich turquoise and as clear as glass. She could see the anchor chain angling down, surrounded by a school of tiny fish that glinted as they swam in and out of slanting, golden shafts of light.

She flexed her long thin body and prepared to dive in.

'Shouldn't you be studying?' It was her father's voice, but Amy pretended not to hear him, stretched up on to her tiptoes, bent her knees and sprang lightly off the edge of the yacht. For a moment she was suspended in space, the clear blue waters of the Aegean spread out beneath her like a glittering carpet. Then she arced down and the sea raced up to meet her. It was a perfect dive; her body barely disturbed the surface, and the next thing she knew she was down with the fish in a cloud of silver bubbles. She bobbed to the surface and swam away from the yacht towards the nearby rocks that formed a wall around the

little natural harbour they were anchored in. After a while she turned and looked back to see her father standing at the rail waving to her.

'I say! Amy! Should you not be studying?' he called out.

'Grace had a headache, father!' she called back, lying easily. 'We're going to carry on later when it's not so hot.'

'Very well . . . See that you do.'

Her father tried to be severe with her, but in this weather, in these beautiful surroundings, with such a lazy lifestyle, he found it as difficult as Grace to maintain any sense of discipline. Besides, Amy thought, diving down and scattering a shoal of snappers, she had always known how to get round him. It was harder for Mark, her older brother. If there had been a fire at his school, he would have been moved somewhere else instantly and there would have been no question of him coming to Greece.

Their father, Sir Cathal Goodenough, was a sailor through and through. He had joined the navy at sixteen and served under Jellicoe at the battle of Jutland, before being made an admiral himself in 1917. He had been knighted for his services in the Great War, protecting convoys from submarine attack in the Atlantic. When his wife died he had left the navy, but the sea was in his blood. He hated to be on dry land, and at any opportunity he would be on one of his three yachts: the *Calypso*, which was moored in the West Indies; his racing yacht, the *Circe*, which was kept in Portsmouth; and this one, his most prized vessel, the *Siren*, which overwintered in Nice.

The *Siren* was a three-masted schooner, with ten passenger berths and a crew of eight. Amy looked at her now, sitting serenely at anchor, her gleaming black hull reflected in the water. The yacht was perfectly at home here, and so was Amy. She had learnt to swim almost before she could walk and would sometimes stay in the water for hours on end. She had no need of a bathing cap because, to the horror of her father, she had recently cut off all her long curls and styled her hair into a more fashionable bob. She was often mistaken for a boy, but that didn't bother her. She knew who she was.

She reached the rocks and hauled herself out to sit in the sun and warm herself. It was late May, still early enough in the year for there to be the occasional cold current in the sea.

She shook sparkling droplets from her freckled skin and looked over at the shore. A dense wood of dark-green cypresses grew right down to the little sandy beach where last night they had set up tables and eaten their supper under the stars. The island, one of the Cyclades that spread out across the sea south of Athens, was tiny and uninhabited and didn't even appear on most maps.

A diving knife in a leather sheath was strapped to Amy's leg. It belonged to Louis, the big French first mate, and he had shown her how to prise shellfish from the rocks to eat. Around her waist was strung a net that she used to hold her catch of mussels and clams. Sitting here on the rock, she felt like a savage, a million miles away from England and her boring school. She was the happiest girl in the world and this must surely be paradise.

She heard the ship before she saw it, a dull throbbing sound, but thought nothing of it. The Mediterranean had been a crowded maritime highway for centuries. She busied herself searching for shellfish, dimly aware of the engine noise getting nearer, but it was a shock when she saw a tramp steamer chug into view, pumping smelly, black smoke from its short funnel. She watched as it moved alongside the *Siren* and noisily dropped anchor. Amy could see several crewmen hurrying about the deck, their skin tanned dark brown by the sun, their outfits grimy and stained.

Next to the sleek, clean lines of the yacht, the steamer looked squat and ugly. Amy peered at the name on the side, written in peeling red paint – *Charon*.

The wind shifted, smearing the plume of black smoke across the sun and throwing the harbour into shadow. For a moment Amy, who was standing knee-deep in a rock pool, was chilled, and she shivered.

From the deck of the *Siren*, her father watched the arrival of the steamer with some curiosity. Other than the name, he could see no flags or markings of any kind and wondered why it had chosen to put in here, in this obscure and secluded harbour.

The obvious answer was that she was in some kind of trouble.

'Hello there, *Siren*!'

Goodenough squinted across the water and made out the figure of a stocky blond man, with a neatly trimmed beard.

'Ahoy,' he called back. 'Are you all right, sir?'

'Engine trouble, I'm afraid,' the man called back.

Goodenough tried to place the accent. It sounded Eastern European, but he couldn't pinpoint it exactly.

'Can I be of any assistance?' he shouted. Any seaman was duty-bound to come to the aid of a fellow mariner in trouble at sea. But, even as he shouted the words, he saw that the other ship had already lowered a rowing boat into the water. Without another word, the blond-haired man sprang over the side and landed neatly in the cutter, in a move that was unconventional but highly dramatic.

Six strong sailors pulled at the oars and the boat sped towards the *Siren*.

Goodenough frowned. There was something not quite right about all this. He looked at the crew and saw two Chinese men, two who looked African, a skinny, pale-skinned man with a broken nose, and a nearly naked, hairless and tattooed giant from the South Seas, wearing a woman's straw hat and smoking a fat cigar.

The blond captain stood in the stern of the boat and grinned, his teeth flashing. His arms, which were as thick as his legs and knotted with muscle, were crossed on his broad chest. He wore knee-length boots and a loose, open tunic fastened with a wide belt.

Goodenough saw, with some relief, that at least none of them were armed.

The cutter pulled alongside and the captain sprang up the ladder as effortlessly as if he were skipping up a flight of steps.

He jumped on to the deck and gave a little bow. Up close his eyes were startling. The irises were so pale as to

be almost colourless and were ringed with a grey that seemed to shine like silver.

'Please allow me to introduce myself,' he said. 'I am Zoltan the Magyar.'

'A Hungarian?' said Goodenough, intrigued. 'From a country without a coastline?'

'Yes, sir,' said Zoltan.

'You Hungarians are not known as sailors,' said Goodenough. 'It is unusual to find one captaining a ship.'

'We are an unusual ship with a crew of many nations. You see that we fly no colours? It is because we are a ship of the world.' Zoltan spread out his arms and slowly turned to all points of the compass. 'I love the sea,' he said. 'It reminds me of Az Alföld, the Great Plain of Hungary. A big sky, and miles of nothing in every direction.'

The crew of the cutter were all on deck now, and crowding round Goodenough. He looked into their sullen, dull faces and they looked back at him with an utter lack of interest. He took a step towards the Magyar and offered his hand.

'Welcome aboard,' he said. 'I am the captain of the *Siren*, Sir –'

'I know who you are,' said the Magyar with a grin. 'You are Cathal Goodenough.' He had trouble pronouncing the 'th' and the name came out sounding more like 'Cattle'.

'It's pronounced Cahill, actually,' said Goodenough automatically, and then stopped himself. 'But how did you know my –?'

'With respect,' Zoltan interrupted with quiet authority in his voice, 'it is pronounced however I want to pronounce it.'

'I beg your pardon,' said Goodenough, taken aback. 'There is no cause to be uncivil. I have offered my assistance to you –'

'My apologies,' the Magyar interrupted again and bowed even lower this time, with a faintly mocking manner. 'You are right. There is no need for any unpleasantness. My men will simply take what we have come for and leave.'

'I'm sorry, I don't understand,' said Goodenough. 'Take what?'

Louis, the first mate, and two other crewmen, wearing their crisp white uniforms, were cautiously approaching along the deck.

'This conversation is becoming boring,' said Zoltan. 'Like a boring English tea party. I went to England once. The food was grey, the sky was grey and the people were dull.' He clapped his hands. 'And now that my men are all in position, I can stop this chit-chat and get on with my business, Sir Goodenough.'

'It's just Goodenough, actually,' said the Englishman with some irritation in his voice. 'You would say "Sir Cathal", but never "Sir Goodenough" –'

'I will say whatever I want to say,' Zoltan snapped. 'Now, please don't annoy me. I am attempting to stay calm and polite, like you Englishmen, because when I am angry I do things that I sometimes later regret. Now, please, I am busy . . .'

So saying, Zoltan the Magyar clapped his hands again and a group of men appeared from behind the deckhouse.

With a shock Goodenough realized that while he and his crew had been distracted, another rowing boat had put out from the tramp steamer and several more sailors had climbed aboard. This new group *were* armed – with knives, cutlasses and guns that they quickly handed out to their friends. The huge South Sea Islander was passed a whaling harpoon, which he held lightly in one massive, tattooed hand. With his other hand he removed the cigar from his mouth and then spat a flake of tobacco on to the deck.

'What is the meaning of this?' said Goodenough, outraged – but he knew the meaning all too well.

They were pirates, and there was nothing he could do.

For emergency use there were two rifles and an ancient pre-war pistol locked away in his cabin, but to this day they had never left their strongbox.

And now it was too late.

The first mate, Louis, made a move, but Goodenough glared at him and he stopped. For a captain to have his command taken from him like this was appalling, but it would be madness to try and resist.

It was best just to get it over with.

'This is a private vessel,' he explained as calmly as he could. 'We have no cargo; we have no hold full of treasure. There is a small safe with some money in it, but not a great amount . . .'

The burly Magyar ignored Goodenough and snapped

some orders in Hungarian. A group of his men hurried below decks.

'You have two choices.' Zoltan approached Goodenough. 'You can tell me the combination of your safe, or I can cut it out of your pretty boat with axes.'

Once again Louis stepped forward and in a quick, expert movement Zoltan pulled a small pistol from inside his tunic and levelled it at him.

Goodenough recognized the pistol: it was an Italian navy-issue 9-millimetre Beretta. These men were no scruffy, disorganized opportunists: they were serious professionals.

He quickly gave the combination for the safe and Zoltan shouted another order to his men.

In a moment there were screams from below and Grace Wainwright was dragged on to the deck. She was followed by the pale-skinned sailor carrying the contents of the safe. Zoltan looked from Grace to the haul, then shook his head peevishly and rubbed a temple.

There was a deep, guttural grunt and the tattooed giant tossed something across the deck. Zoltan caught it and his face brightened.

It was a small bronze statuette.

'Thank you, Tree-Trunk,' he said.

Tree-Trunk smiled and exhaled a cloud of cigar smoke.

Zoltan held the statuette up to his mouth with two hands and kissed it.

'Leave that!' yelled Goodenough, his anger getting the better of him. 'That will be of no value to you. It is a very well-documented piece of art. There is nowhere in

the world you could sell it . . . And if you melted it down it would be an absolute tragedy.'

Zoltan smiled, turned slowly and fixed Goodenough with his steel-rimmed gaze.

'I am not a peasant!' he said. 'I am no ignorant *gulyás*. I know what I want. I want this bronze, Sir Cattle.'

'Cahill, man – it's *Car-hill*!'

'Be quiet, you damned Englishman.'

'You know nothing of its true worth,' Goodenough protested.

'I know it is by Donato di Betto Bardi,' said Zoltan. 'Commonly known as Donatello. Fifteenth century, cast in Florence, a model for the design of a fountain that was never built.' He turned the statuette in his hands. 'It is a figure from Greek mythology. A siren. The very siren that this boat was named after. The sirens were monsters – half woman, half bird. With their beautiful voices they tricked passing ships on to the rocks and ate their crews.' He looked at Goodenough. 'Women, Sir Goodenough. You must always be careful of them. They are dangerous.'

'That statuette belonged to my wife,' Goodenough said quietly.

'This statuette was stolen by Napoleon from the Duke of Florence,' said Zoltan. 'And it was stolen from Napoleon by one of your wife's family after Waterloo. Now it is my turn to steal it.'

Goodenough made a grab for the bronze and the Magyar flicked a hand at him, as casually as if he was swatting away a fly, but it was enough to send Goodenough

crashing to the deck. He lay there for a moment, stunned.

Louis cursed and ran at Zoltan but he stopped suddenly and fell back with a gasp. Tree-Trunk had hurled his harpoon into him with such force that half its length protruded from the Frenchman's back. Louis struggled for a few moments on the deck, then lay still.

'I did not want any bloodshed today,' said Zoltan. 'But you have forced my hand.'

Goodenough hauled himself groggily to his feet and glared at Zoltan. 'You are a barbarous pig, sir. A common pirate.'

Zoltan passed the statuette to the tattooed giant and grabbed Goodenough by his shirt.

'Do not make me angry,' he hissed.

Goodenough looked into his eyes; the pale irises seemed to have darkened.

'Take what you want,' Goodenough pleaded, 'but can you not leave the Donatello? It means a great deal to me.'

Zoltan pushed Goodenough away and took the bronze back from Tree-Trunk.

'No,' he said simply.

Despite himself, Goodenough grabbed him.

'You will not take that! I don't care what you do; you can prise it from my dead hands if you wish, but I won't give it up without a fight.'

He took hold of the statuette and grappled over it, pressed right up against Zoltan, who was backed against a bulkhead. They struggled for half a minute before a muffled bang suddenly erupted and there was the smell

of singed flesh and cloth. Goodenough staggered backwards, clutching his stomach.

'You've shot me,' he said and dropped to his knees.

'That is very perceptive of you, Sir Goodenough. I told you not to make me angry.'

'I'll see you rot in hell for this.'

'I doubt it very much. In a few minutes you will be dead. Good day to you.'

So saying, Zoltan the Magyar leapt overboard into the waiting cutter. In a moment he was joined by his oarsmen and they raced back to the steamer. Once there, he climbed over the side and stood on deck, studying the statuette and breathing heavily through his nose. Despite some minor complications it had been a good morning's work. He ran a finger over the shapely curves of the siren's body and smiled. In many ways it had been too easy.

As he turned to go below he suddenly felt a searing pain in his left shoulder and he dropped the bronze to the deck. He spun round and saw a short-haired girl of about fourteen wearing a bathing costume, water dripping from her thin body, a mixture of anger and fear showing on her young face.

Zoltan looked down at his tunic. It was stained dark with his own blood. He put his right hand up to where a cold, dull ache drilled into his shoulder. A knife was stuck fast there; jammed into the joint. Half of him felt like weeping and the other half felt like laughing. This girl had spirit. If he had not turned at the last moment, the knife would have stabbed him next to his spine.

His left arm hung uselessly at his side; the pain and loss of blood were making him weak.

'You're going to regret that you didn't kill me,' he said quietly.

'One day I'll finish the job,' the girl said bitterly.

Zoltan was now swamped by his crew, all yelling and shouting in panic. Three of them took hold of the girl.

'Give me air, and bring me wine,' Zoltan snarled. 'Bull's Blood!'

Someone handed him a bottle and he took a long gulp, dribbling the dark-red wine down his chin. Then he steeled himself and, with a furious cry, wrenched the knife out of his shoulder.

'Sink the boat,' he said, flinging the knife into the sea. 'Take the women . . . and kill all the men.'

The knife sank through the silent water, turning and twisting, the blood washing away. It landed in the sand at the bottom and stood there like a cross on an underwater grave.