



## CHAPTER ONE

A dim moon rose over the ocean as the wind blew thickening clouds across the sky. Faint shadows were cast up on the island below: huge, black sailing ships, sea monsters, and other things that haunted the midnight waters seemed to cascade over the hills. Few stars were strong enough to twinkle through the stormy haze. The white sands of the beach were swept into little whirlwinds, shifting the patterns on the sand dunes. A bad night for sailing.

The few respectable citizens of Tortuga stayed snug in their well-guarded houses. Everyone else—buccaneers, swashbucklers, and cutthroats all—was down at the Faithful Bride, drinking ale and rum. Between gusts of wind from the gathering storm, the noise from the tavern could be heard a half mile away. Laughing, shouting, and the occasional burst of gunfire echoed through the night as drinkers took up a shanty they all knew:

*Blow high! Blow low! And so sailed we.  
I see a wreck to windward and a lofty ship  
to lee, A-sailing down all on the coasts of High  
Barbary. . . .*

From outside, the Faithful Bride looked like nothing more than an oversize shack. It wasn't even built out of proper wood, but from the timbers of wrecked boats. It smelled like a boat, too: tar and salt and seaweed and fish. When a light rain finally began to fall, the roof leaked in a dozen places. Inside, no one seemed to care about the puddles on the floor. Tankards were clashed together for toasts, clapped on the table for refills, and occasionally thrown at someone's head.

It was crowded tonight, every last shoddy chair filled in the candle-lit tavern. *I reckon we have enough old salts here to crew every ship in Port Royal*, the Faithful Bride's young barmaid, Arabella, thought. She was clearing empty mugs off a table surrounded by men who were all hooting at a story. Like everyone in the pub, they were dressed in the tattered, mismatched garb common to all the "sailors" of the area: ragged breeches, faded waistcoats, stubby beards, and the odd sash or belt.

One of them tugged on her skirt, grinning toothlessly. Arabella rolled her eyes and sighed. "Let me guess," she said, tossing aside her tangled auburn locks. "Ale, ale, ale and . . . oh, probably another ale?" The sailor howled with laughter. "That's my lass!"

Arabella took a deep breath and moved on to the other tables. "There's no Spanish treasure left but inland, ye daft sprog," a sailor swore. "I'm not talkin' about *Spanish* treasure," his friend, the second-rate pirate Handsome Todd said, lowering his voice. There was a gleam in his eye, not yet dulled by drink. "I'm talkin' about Aztec Gold, from a whole *lost kingdom*. . . ." Arabella paused and listened in, pretending to pick a mug up off the floor.

"Yer not talking about Stone-Eyed Sam and *Isla Esquelética*?" the sailor replied, skeptically. "*Legend* says Sam 'e had the Sword of Cortés, and 'e cursed the whole island. Aye, I agree with only one part of that story—that it's *legend*. Legend, mate. 'A neat little city of stone and marble—just like them there Romans built,' they say. Bah! Rubbish! Aren't nothing like that in the Caribbean, I can tell you!" "Forget the blasted kingdom and the sword, it's his *gold* I'm talking about," Handsome Todd spat out. "And I can tell you, I *know* it's real. Seen it with my own eyes, I have. It changes hands often, like it's got legs all its own. But there are ways of finding it." "Ye got a ship, then?" the first sailor said with a leery look in his eyes. "Aye, a fine little boat, perfect for slipping in and out of port unseen . . ." Handsome Todd began. But then he noticed Arabella, who was pretending to wipe something from the floor with her apron. She looked up and gave him a weak smile. She looked again at the floor and rubbed fiercely with the edge of her apron. "Blasted men, spillin' their ale," she said. Handsome Todd relaxed. But he looked around suspiciously as if the other buccaneers, the walls, or the King himself were listening. "Let's go somewhere a bit quieter, then, shall we? As they say, *dead men tell no tales*."

Arabella cursed and moved away. Usually, no one cared—no one *noticed* if she were there or not. To the patrons of the Bride, she was just

the girl who filled the tankards. She had heard hundreds of stories and legends over the years. Each story was almost like being on an adventure. Almost. *Still*, she decided, *not a bad night, considering*. It could have been far worse. A storm often seemed to bring out the worst in an already bad lot of men.

And then, suddenly, the door blew open with gale force. A crash of lightning illuminated the person in the doorway. It was a stranger, wet to the bone. Shaggy black hair was plastered against his head, and the lightning glinted in his eyes. Arabella held her breath—she had never seen anyone like him before.

Then the door slammed shut, and the candlelight revealed an angry, dripping, young man—no older than Arabella. There was silence for a moment. Then the patrons shrugged and returned to their drinks. The stranger began to make his way through the crowd, eyes darting left and right, up and down like a crow's. He was obviously looking for someone, or *something*. His jaw was set in anger.

His hazel eyes lit up for a moment: he must have found what he was looking for. He bent down behind a chair, and reached for something. Arabella stood on her tiptoes to see—it just looked like an old sack. Not at all worth stealing from the infamous pirate who was guarding it. "Oh, no . . ." Arabella whispered. The stranger bit his lip in concentration. He stretched his fingers as long and narrow as possible, discretely trying to reach between the legs of the chair.

Without warning—and without taking the drink from his lips—the man who sat in the chair rose up, all seven feet and several hundred pounds of him. His eyes were the color of a storm, and they sparked with anger. The stranger pressed his palms together and gave a quick bow. "Begging your pardon, Sir, just admiring my . . . I mean *your* fine satchel there." He said, extremely politely. The pirate roared and brought his heavy tankard down, aiming for the stranger's head. The stranger grabbed the sack and sidestepped just in time. The mug whistled past his ear . . .  
. . . and hit another pirate behind him.

This other pirate wasn't as big, but he was just as irritable. And armed. And he thought the stranger was the one who had just hit him in the head with a tankard! The pirate drew a rapier and lunged for the stranger. The stranger scooted backward, moving out of the way of the deadly blade. His second attacker kept going, falling forward into the table where the giant pirate had been sitting. The rickety table broke under his

weight, and drinks, coins, and knives flew into the air. The buccaneers around the table leapt up, drawing their swords and pistols.

It didn't take much to start a barroom brawl in Tortuga. The Faithful Bride exploded with the sounds of punches, groans, screams, yells and hollers, the clash of cutlasses striking rapiers, and the snap of wood as chairs were broken over heads. All this, in addition to the sound of the crashing thunder and the leaking ceiling that began to pour down on the brawling patrons.

The stranger was caught in the middle of it. And to make matters worse, the giant pirate was still after him. The huge pirate drew his sword and swung it at the stranger. The stranger leapt up onto the chair behind him, the blade slicing the air where he had just stood. "That's a bit close, mate," the stranger said. He jumped off the chair again and kicked at one of its legs, causing it to flip up into the air and land in his hands. The giant swung again, but the stranger held the chair like a shield, blocking every strike. Bits of wood flew off the chair where the blade hit. Another pirate dove for the stranger—or maybe for someone behind him, it was hard to tell at this point. The stranger leaned out of the way, just barely avoiding the collision, and his attacker toppled into the giant pirate. With the giant now otherwise engaged, the stranger hoisted the sack onto his shoulder, turned around and surveyed the scene behind him. What was—for pirates—a fairly quiet night of drinking, had turned into yet another bloody and violent brawl like the others he'd seen in his day. He couldn't resist grinning. "Huh. Not a *single* bruise on me," he said out loud. "Not one blasted scratch on *Jack Sparrow*."

Then someone smashed a bottle against a timber above his head. The giant had risen behind him, surprisingly quiet for such a large man. Jack swung around to see him and began to back away. "*You'll just be giving me that sack now, boy*" the pirate said in a deadly voice, holding the broken bottle before him and pointing it at Jack. "Uh . . ." Jack looked around, but he was surrounded by the fight on all sides, still blocked from the door. "Good Sir . . ." he began, hoping something would come to him. But before he could think of a way out of this one, the giant roared and bolted forward. A hand grabbed Jack by the collar and yanked him out of the way. But it happened so quickly that the giant kept running and crashed right into a group of a half-dozen pirates who were battering each other along the far wall. There was a crack of wood, a crash of glass, and a blast of rolling thunder from the storm outside. The angry pirates all turned toward the not-so-gentle giant and pounced on him.

Arabella kept a very firm grip on Jack's collar as she pulled him quickly through the crowd, ducking and avoiding the brawling sailors. And *Jack* kept a very firm grip on the sack. *His* sack. After a few more near misses, Jack and Arabella staggered out the back door and into the stormy tropical night.

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