



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?