



CHAPTER 1

HIDE AND SEEK

He was making himself as small as possible. This wasn't easy, given how tall he had grown recently and how cramped the space was that he was hiding in. And he was making himself as quiet as a mouse – in fact *quieter*, he realised, as he watched a small furry creature emerge from the gloom and scurry excitedly towards his face. Silently, the boy drew his finger to his lips to tell the mouse to shush. But, whilst his sign might be recognised all over the world by humans, he wasn't sure if it would be understood by a rodent.

The boy was still reeling from the sight of his mother, sprawled on the bed in her cabin. *This* cabin. She lay only a few feet from him. Utterly still.

Her skin had been as cold as winter water to his touch. There was so much blood on the bedclothes, pooling out from where her heart still lay, though it was no longer beating. His own heart raced wildly. He could feel it

and he could hear it, thumping heavily against his ribcage. In the confined space, the noise seemed louder, echoing around him. He was sure it was going to give away his hiding place, reveal his presence to the intruders – the evil people who had arrived in the night, boarded this ship and, with icy efficiency, killed his mother.

Dead. Murdered. The words were so strange in his head. He knew their meaning, of course, but it felt impossible to apply them to his own mother. The woman who had raised him these eleven years alone – who had taught him how to sail ships and navigate by starlight, to wield swords and crossbows almost as masterfully as she could. His mother, who had schooled him in how to grade diamonds and gold and how to quickly spot a real da Vinci from a fake. His mother, with whom he had eaten supper just a few hours earlier, out on the upper deck. They had laughed together, as the sun sank behind their sails, talking about this and that and nothing at all. The thought that he would never hear her throaty laugh again was already hard to bear.

Maybe he should just give himself up and allow them to take him too. It would likely be a quick death and it would take away this terrible fear, swelling in his belly like a demon. He knew they were getting closer.

He could hear footsteps and voices. It was only a matter of time. Their swords were thirsty again.

Now there came a knocking. Muffled at first, then clearer and louder. They must be here inside his mother's cabin, right in front of the cupboard he had hurled himself into. He froze, trying to think himself even smaller, even quieter. He noticed that the mouse had gone away, presumably bored by this game of sleeping pirates.

The knocking came again. Now he not only heard it but felt it ricochet through his body. It was as if they were already beating the living daylight out of him. His eyes were already closed but now he squeezed them even more tightly shut. As if that would protect him. The knocking grew louder, closer.

"Neo! Neo, are you there? Are you awake?"

He opened his eyes with a start.

He had been dreaming. He wasn't on the ship, *Death and the Maiden*, which he had called home for the best part of his life. He was here in his landlocked cabin at Pirate Academy. His body was tightly folded but he wasn't in the confines of a cupboard – he was simply twisted in the sheets of his bunk. He was no longer the boy called Ned Darkwater. He was . . .

"Neo! I can hear you in there! Let me in!"

He swung his legs over the bunk. He took a deep breath in and out of his belly, letting go of the nightmare, allowing his eyes to drink in the familiar surroundings of his room. The knocking came again.

"I'm coming!" he called out, padding over to the door and opening it.

"Have you seen the time?" Jacoby asked him, tapping his watch. "We're going to be late." Then his expression and voice changed. "Are you OK? You don't look OK."

Neo attempted a smile. "I'm . . . all right. I was just really deep in sleep, I guess."

Jacoby studied his face carefully. It reminded Neo of being examined by a doctor. Seeing that Jacoby was dressed in his aqua-coloured tracksuit pulled Neo's own thoughts into sharp focus. His new friend, who was also his secret brother, had – as usual – come to collect him for the 5k run which signalled the start of each new day for Barracuda Class.

"How late are we?" Neo asked.

"We need to be at Swashbuckle Hill in precisely nine minutes," Jacoby informed him, stepping into Neo's cabin. "Or we'll be doing hundreds of press-ups. And you *know* how I feel about press-ups!"

Neo nodded, already striding towards the bathroom.

Now Jacoby was here, the day was starting to feel more normal.

“You could miss brushing your teeth just this once,” Jacoby said.

Neo shook his head. “Never neglect your personal hygiene,” he said, popping his toothbrush in his mouth. He disappeared into the bathroom and completed a basic wash routine in under two minutes. Stepping back out again, satisfied he was smelling fresh, he quickly changed into his own aqua tracksuit and running shoes. Meanwhile, Jacoby anxiously watched the other Academy students through the window. His legs jiggled as they always did when he was tense.

“OK,” Jacoby said. “We have five and a half minutes now. Can we do it?”

Neo grinned, his freshly polished teeth gleaming at his brother. “Never underestimate a Barracuda!”