

CHAPTER ONE

IF YOU CAN KEEP YOUR HEAD . . .



Sidorio stood on the beach, cradling in his hands the decapitated head of his new bride.

Lola. He opened his mouth to speak her name, but it was too painful to say the word and know that she was gone. To know that she would never again glance up at him, her eyes sparkling with dark purpose. That she would never again smile and take his hand. Never again lift one of her favourite antique glasses, filled with her own special vintage, and sip from it with all the grace of her aristocratic lineage . . .

He gazed down at her in wonder. Even in this state, with her face turning as pale as the reflection of the moon on the becalmed sea, her beauty was peerless. Lady Lola Elizabeth Mercy Lockwood Sidorio. It was not yet an hour since they had been married and she had been taken from him. Cruelly dispatched at the altar by his own son. A tear welled up in Sidorio's eye. It was not a familiar sensation. The bead of water escaped and fell like a raindrop onto Lola's cheek. Sidorio had a sudden fancy that the water might somehow revive her. That she was not dead

but only sleeping. But deep down, in the knot of his stomach, he knew she was gone. He was alone again.

Sidorio lifted his eyes for a moment and saw a small boat skimming away across the water, the pirate squad heading back to its ship, their terrible mission completed. Already, they were too far off for him to distinguish between the silhouettes of the vicious captain Cheng Li and Lola's youthful assassin. But Sidorio held the image of the boy's face clearly in his mind, for it was the face of his own flesh and blood. His son, Connor.

"My boy," he rasped, in agony.

From somewhere came a sound resembling a sigh. Instantly, he glanced down at his wife's head, wondering if there was any conceivable way the sound had emanated from her. But no. It was merely a rogue wave, lapping against the shore. Lola's face was as impassive as ever. Sidorio traced the line of his wife's cheek. Her skin had begun to change now – not only in colour but also in tone – no longer the smooth alabaster he was used to.

Sidorio stared down at the tattoo of a black heart painted around Lola's left eye. That black heart, that closed eyelid, covered the most precious of jewels. Sidorio willed Lola to open her eyes just one more time. If only he could see her beautiful mahogany-coloured eyes for one last, fleeting moment. But no, a single moment with Lola would be too tantalising. He would always want more. Even if he could turn the clock back a mere hour, when all eternity was spread out before them, he would always feel ravenous for more time with Lola. Her skin was growing more wrinkled with every second. Now that the seal of her immortality had been broken, the hungry years were at last racing to catch up with her and consume her. It was a terrible thing to behold.

Sidorio thought back to their first meeting. It had been on another beach, not dissimilar to this one. She and her crew had been playing games with him, but, as she had confessed that night, it had all been a ploy to catch his attention. How had she put it? She was so dextrous with words. "It's not easy for a minnow to signal a whale." That's right! He could almost hear her voice. He smiled momentarily. How long though, he wondered, before he lost the ability to summon up that distinctive, cut-glass timbre? How long before even this memory was lost?

His thoughts moved on to the time he had trespassed onto her ship, *The Vagabond* – a considerably smaller vessel than his own, the mighty *Blood Captain*. That night, he had interrupted her as she prepared for her nightly blood bath. It was part of her secret beauty regime but she had broken it for him. Instead, they had drunk together from the antique glasses she prized so dearly. She had fed him sweetmeats.

This memory soon spiralled into another – the first time they had gone hunting together. Lola was always clear that she preferred to drink blood from a glass, but still she had hunted with him, telling him she wanted to know his ways – not only to know them but to *experience* them. He had tried to do the same for her, too, though he had never quite understood the appeal of the glass over the human vessel. Those nights they had hunted together, like two rampant wolves, had been nights of the purest joy he could remember. To think of them now brought only coldness to his immortal bones and a dull, heavy ache to his head. In his hands, Lola's face grew more wrinkled with every passing minute. Her skin was so dry, it was starting to flake. She was being ravaged before his very eyes. Sidorio began to fear

his beautiful wife might simply turn to dust and slip through his fingers into the night air.

He closed his eyes, urging darkness to engulf him. Now, even to think of her was a constant source of pain. But she was within him. Images of her filled his being as completely as blood cells: the time she had helped him pick out new clothes, like the wedding suit he was wearing still, though he would never again have use for such finery; the evening she had placed her tiny hand on his and shown him how to swirl the vintage inside the glass to release its aroma; then that moment – that magical moment – when she had consented to become his wife . . .

She had become his wife but, more than that, she had become his world. Now she was gone.

Sidorio had been lonely before, but never like this. He let out a sorrowful roar.

The wind whispered close in his ear, as if somehow it shared his mourning. The sound came again and Sidorio wondered if it could, after all, be the wind. The beach was calm and the air was still and dry.

There was a third sound, not so much a whisper as a cough. Tempted to believe that some drop of life still remained in Lola, he glanced down, fearful of the bitter disappointment ahead. But, he had no choice. He had to gaze again at her beautiful face. At that perfect tattoo of a black heart.

He contemplated his wife's ruby lips. Was it his imagination or had they parted slightly since he had last looked? And her skin seemed, if not smoother, then at least no more wrinkled and cracked than before. Sidorio shook his head. A man could drive himself mad with such imaginings.

And now perhaps madness *had* taken hold of Sidorio. Because, as he gazed at his wife's face once more, he saw a fragile eyelid flutter. The black heart was broken. And, in its place, he saw the dazzling beauty of Lola's eye.

Sidorio felt himself inextricably sinking into the depths of insanity. "No," he moaned. "Don't play tricks on me! Let me mourn her."

At that Lola's cracked lips shifted into a soft smile. Then he heard her unmistakeable voice. "You're a touch premature in mourning me, my darling husband."

Sidorio froze. "No more tricks!" he cried. "Whoever you are, whoever is doing this, stop! I must let her go!"

Lola's eyes blazed with fire at that. "Darling Sid. I am not going anywhere just yet. Though if you would be a dear and hurry up and reunite me with my body, I'd happily go back to one or other of our ships with you . . ."

This was no dream. No madness. It was a genuine, gold carat miracle!

Sidorio couldn't contain the torrent of joy that swept through him. "You're back!" he cried, tears streaming down his face. "But how? How can it be?"

Lola gazed up at him. Though her face was creased and desiccated, it was still unmistakeably one of rare beauty. "Dear, dear Sid. Did you really think I'd leave you on our wedding night? Not a chance! A man like you is hard to find."

Sidorio shook his head in wonder. Now he knew he wasn't imagining this. Only Lola would say something like that. "You're back," he said. "You're really back!"

"Yes," said Lady Lola Elizabeth Mercy Lockwood Sidorio.

“I’m back, husband. So let’s not waste another moment. Take me to my body and then I’m going to need something exceedingly strong to drink.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” he said. As he spoke, Sidorio was already striding across the sand, cradling his precious wife’s head in his hands. Joyously, he broke into a run, then propelled himself up into the air. He flew up to the top of the cliff, where Lady Lola’s svelte but inert body lay patiently waiting on the cliff-top, ready to be reunited with her wayward head.

Sidorio laid Lola’s head down upon the grass, holding it as close as possible to the torn veins and arteries, the broken bone and muscles of her neck. As he did so, Lola closed her eyes once more. She frowned, as if in excruciating pain. Sidorio was struck with fear that this wouldn’t work, but soon the fibres of her neck began to knit themselves back together.

Sidorio watched, fascinated, as Lola’s bruised and bloodied skin rapidly began to repair itself. The flaking skin fell from her face and the wrinkles ebbed away like the outgoing tide. Her face swiftly regained its customary sheen and suppleness. If anything, she looked younger than before. Throughout this, her eyes remained closed. She looked peaceful now, as if she were taking a restorative nap.

Sidorio laid the palms of his thick hands on either side of his wife’s beautiful face, tendrils of her raven-black hair spilling over his grubby fingers. He could scarcely believe she was actually here; that he was not imagining this miraculous reunion. But the mere touch of her flesh felt different now. He could sense a new energy fizzing beneath the surface of her skin. He knew little of vampire biology, but imagined dark cells multiplying, oscillating within her veins.

Lola opened her eyes and an extraordinary light beamed from inside them – a light which seemed to illuminate both the life within her and the journey ahead. Now Lola was back at his side, they could at last embark on their voyage together. Who knew where it would take them?

Sidorio felt himself coming back to life again, along with his wife. Once more, he thought of Connor. If this miraculous reunion with Lola had been possible, why not then a reunion with his son too, however improbable it seemed? And with his daughter, Grace, of course. It was time to unite his whole family.

He became aware of his wife staring up at him, her head pillowed on the soft grass. Sidorio leaned down, carefully stroking a stray wisp of hair away from her eyes, so that her distinctive tattoo was clear to see once more. “What’s next for us, I wonder, my black heart?”

Lola’s eyelids fluttered as delicately as the velvet wings of a moth. “After a wedding,” she said, huskily, “isn’t it customary for the groom to take his new bride on a honeymoon?”

“A honeymoon?” Sidorio found himself racing to catch up. “A honeymoon. Yes, of course. Where would you like to go?”

“Somewhere cold,” Lola answered. “I’m tired of this incessant heat. Take me somewhere *bitterly* cold.”

Sidorio beamed at her, his twin gold incisors glinting in the moonlight. “Whatever your beautiful black heart desires, my love. You know I’d do anything for you.”

Lola smiled at that and lifted her hand to Sidorio’s. “And I for you,” she said. “For all eternity.”