

POLARIS

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CHAPTER 1

LOCKED IN

Owen had just helped to round up his fellow ship's boys and bring them to the captain's cabin. For his trouble, Captain Eagling shoved him in last. Unprepared for the sharp cuff to the shoulder, Owen stumbled into the low square room, nearly bumping his head on the oil lamp suspended from the ceiling.

"Stay in there until I come get you," called the captain. "This meeting is no place for children—and we've already lost one of you lot."

Owen straightened up quickly, brushing off his vest and hoping none of the others had seen him stumble. A name shot through his mind like a winter chill—Obed Macy, the boy they'd lost—but he had no time for such thoughts now. "All right, I'll keep an eye on them for you," he called back.

Captain Eagling responded by slamming the door. Owen had half expected that. What he hadn't expected was the sound of iron sliding into place.

"What was that?" asked Henry. There was a soft, hesitant quality to his voice that annoyed Owen.

"We're locked in," he snapped.

In the glow of the small lamp, the cabin was only a little brighter than the drizzly gray twilight outside. Owen had been in the captain's cabin countless times—he was, after all, the cabin boy. The botanist's assistant had been in a few times too, back when his master was still around to justify his shipboard existence. But for the other four ship's boys this was a new experience. Owen watched with a certain pride as their eyes drank in the little luxuries, so unlike their own cramped quarters: teacups in the snug little cupboard, ornate maps on the wall.

Mario nodded toward a knife and fork on the table and spoke in a soft Spanish accent, "Think those are real silver?"

Owen eyed him suspiciously. Mario was standing next to his brother, as always. Both were lean and vaguely birdlike, but he knew they were hard workers and that Manny, in particular, was an acrobat aloft. "Of course they're silver—and they've been counted!" he warned.

Mario put his hands up, palms out to show that they were empty.

"Is there anything else we ain't allowed to touch?" asked Aaron Burnett.

He was a powder monkey, responsible for carrying gunpowder to the ship's cannons. The *Polaris* had four of them, not too bad for an armed merchantman. Hauling gunpowder in the heat of battle was dangerous work, and Aaron had been on deck when a powder monkey named Josué had blown up trying to

carry two cartridges at once. Rumor had it that bits of the boy could still be found up in the topsails. Aaron had become exceedingly cautious ever since. He measured his steps and the gunpowder with equal care. Owen didn't bother to answer him. He knew that the timid boy would be no trouble.

But there was one boy who might be. Owen's eyes landed on the only ship's boy left to consider: the new hold rat now that Obed Macy had gone missing. Owen sensed him more than saw him, skulking silently in the far corner of the cabin, hiding his scarred face in the shadows. Thacher Maybin . . .

Shouting out on the deck interrupted Owen's thoughts. As he rushed over to press his ear against the locked door, the reason for their confinement came back to him. An all-hands meeting had been called, and the ship's boys were not welcome. At the very least, there would be swearing. At the worst . . . He didn't want to think about that.

A light rain was falling and the seas were up. A storm was approaching, but the tensions on board had little to do with the worsening weather. The uneasy feeling had been rising steadily for the last week, ever since the doomed inland expedition had returned and the ship had immediately set sail for home.

The loss of so many men had taken a toll. Everyone on board had lost a friend or six, and of course, their absence left that much more work for the survivors. The demise of the popular and proficient first mate was an especially heavy blow. Now the

former second mate, the dour and hard-driving William Shannahan, oversaw the day-to-day running of the ship.

And almost as bad for the crew's morale as the loss of their comrades was the lack of any real explanation. What exactly had happened out there in the dark precincts of the jungle? The captain had forbidden any open discussion of the matter. To question the captain was to risk flogging, or even hanging. But down in the crew quarters, Owen had heard the whispered rumors spread.

There was talk of a strange tropical sickness and wild tales of a beast in the night. And as much as he'd heard, Owen knew there was much more being shared in secret. The sailors had never trusted the captain's nephew. But trusted or not, he'd witnessed some of the strange happenings below deck himself. The sights and sounds—and even the smells—seemed to bring those rumors to life.

Now the ship had dropped anchor, sheltering from the wind in the lee of a small island, preparing to ride out the storm, in every sense. With the dark mood nearly unbearable, a meeting had finally been called.

Suddenly, there were more shouts on deck. Owen leaned in, but the wooden door was too thick—and the wind outside too strong—for him to make out the words. He cupped his hand around his right ear and moved over to the narrow gap of the doorframe. He could sense the others crowding around behind him.

“What’re they saying?” asked Aaron.

“SHHHH!” said Owen, closing his eyes and trying to concentrate. The steady drone of half a dozen people talking at once was mostly drowned out by the wind. But as the gusts died down for a moment, a single shout cut through the air.

“Hand over Wrickitts!”

Owen heard it clearly, not just the words but the voice. It was the new first mate, William Shannahan. But who was he shouting at? It couldn’t possibly be—

“Stand down, Shannahan.”

Owen gasped. It was the captain’s voice. “He’s a sick man and he’ll get our care,” the captain continued. There was a murmuring of agreement.

“Sick?” shouted Shannahan as the murmuring changed to an angry grumbling. “The man is in—”

The whipping wind returned, whistling through the gap in the doorframe and carrying away the rest of Shannahan’s words. Owen slumped to the floor, stunned by what he’d just heard. The first mate arguing with the captain . . .

“What did you hear?” repeated Aaron.

Owen looked up at him, his eyes wide with disbelief, and spoke a single word. It was a word that even sailors, who called sharks “Johnnies” and made light of the most dangerous conditions, seldom dared to speak. It was a word like dark magic.

“Mutiny.”