

CHAPTER



1

THE FLAG'S SKULL and crossed swords rippled over Main Street, its white-on-black design stained red by the sunset.

Twelve-year-old Lulu Davenport braced herself in the streetcar's open door and gauged the banner's motion, jiggling with impatience. When would they glimpse the ocean? It hadn't been visible from the train.

"Wind's in the east," she said. "Windspeed about ten knots, do you think?"

"Perfect sailing weather." Her sister Frankie, one year older, gripped the upright beside her. "Has the trolley always been this slow? I'm about to jump off and run to the harbor myself. I bet I'd get there faster!"

Lulu fired up at the suggestion, then fired down again, remembering their instructions.

“Papa asked us to ride straight home from the station,” she reminded Frankie.

Frankie waved her hand. “If he cared that much, he could’ve met us himself. But I did think Algie’d be there, though; didn’t you?”

“Maybe his asthma is bothering him, and he stayed home to rest.” Lulu craned her neck, but no gleam of water greeted her between buildings— not yet. An occasional downed palm branch strewed the streets, tokens of what had probably been an afternoon thunderstorm. The summer rainy season was already under way.

“Home.” Frankie pulled in a deep breath, her dark blonde hair blowing into her eyes. “Nothing else really matters, does it?”

Lulu smiled. Frankie didn’t have to say anything else; Lulu understood. Though the sisters hadn’t spent much time at their southwest Florida townhouse during the years that their father, Mr. Davenport, was running his beloved but ill-fated Hotel Paraíso in the seclusion of the swamps, High Town was still in the subtropics—still on the coast—still home.

Home. Lulu leaned farther into the sunset air, unbidden tears pricking her eyes. Why? There was no reason for her to cry. All through the long, dry year at their urban northeastern

boarding school, she'd felt as if she'd been holding back those tears, a stranded fish longing for sunlight and bright water. And now, when she didn't need to, here she was crying. Silly . . . Davenports didn't cry, they were tough.

The silhouette of a great blue heron winged across the rooftops. Lulu wiped her nose quickly on her sleeve and hoped Frankie hadn't noticed her emotion.

The trolley whizzed beneath festoons of bunting. Letters on the colorful, triangular pennants spelled out a message:

GET READY! THE INVASION IS COMING!

"Looks like they've got the whole town decked out." Frankie pulled her head and shoulders in out of the wind. Mr. Davenport had already informed the sisters about the upcoming pirate festival, planned by the city's leadership to bring tourists to High Town for its Fourth of July celebrations. "That reminds me—did you ever finish that picture, the one you were doing for Algie's birthday present?"

"Yes!" Eager to share her work, Lulu dropped onto the nearest trolley bench and lifted the flap of the artist's satchel she carried everywhere. Carefully she withdrew the painting and scanned it anxiously. Had the emotions she'd labored to convey drained away since the last time she'd looked at it? That happened with her artwork sometimes. After the rush

of creation had subsided, what had once seemed so vibrant and alive could turn out to be a jumble of color and faulty perspective. While working on the gift, she had relived that glowing, vivid time last winter when they were all together: herself, Frankie, and their best friend Algie Emsworth, striving toward a shared goal in a place they loved, never once wishing to be anywhere else.

The magic had held. There they all stood, looking out at her in ink and watercolor from the lush grounds of the now-defunct Hotel Paraíso where they had met last year. Algie had wintered at the hotel in hopes that the warm, humid climate might ease his chronic asthma, and the three had bonded over their connection as aspiring naturalists. Lulu had drawn Algie's lanky limbs, freckles, and resolute gaze with careful detail. Frankie stood beside him with her legs planted apart, staring out at the observer with the attitude Lulu thought of most frequently when it came to her sister: unshakable. Lulu's own watercolor incarnation was smiling, her arms linked through those of her two best friends.

And behind the three children in the sketch, the creature that had cast a glow of wonder over that entire time . . .

Octavia.

Lulu's heart ached with awe as she marveled yet again at the immense octopus's grace and beauty. She had captured as best she could her glistening mantle, her fifty-foot-long

arms and intelligent, horizontally barred eyes. Pursued by an out-of-season red tide bloom, Octavia had fled the toxin-laced Gulf of Mexico to an inland spring on the hotel grounds, where she had constructed a grotto to shelter her eight babies. The children had discovered them and dreamed of introducing the new species to the scientific community, but decided on secrecy after rescuing the octopus family from avaricious trophy hunters.

Frankie hadn't said anything about the painting. Nervous, Lulu glanced at her older sister. Did Frankie feel any of the emotion that Lulu had tried so hard to infuse onto the page?

"Frankie!" she exclaimed, hurt. Frankie was leaning out the trolley door again, basking in the sunset.

"Mm?" Her sister pulled her head back in.

"Why'd you ask about the picture if you weren't even going to look at it?" Lulu tried not to pout. She didn't like to think of herself as someone who pouted. But her lip seemed to stick out of its own accord.

"Because I know you wanted to get it done before we saw Algie tonight." Frankie looked bewildered.

"Don't you want to see it?" Lulu couldn't help asking.

"Sure!" Frankie dropped into a chair beside her, glanced, then laughed. "I loved it when he did that." She tapped the rendering of Pulpy, the spriteliest of the baby octopuses, with a penchant for squeezing himself into places he didn't

belong and a special bond with Algie. Lulu had drawn him perched atop Algie's head.

"What do you think they're doing now?" Lulu asked, a little wistfully. She hoped all nine octopuses were safe and happy in the deserted Cuban cove where they had helped relocate them, far from human habitation. She knew they were better off and safer there . . . but she still missed them.

"Swimming. Sunbathing. Exploring. All the things we're about to be doing." Frankie tilted her head. "Algie's left arm looks longer than his right. And the lighting is off."

Slumping, Lulu closed the sketchbook. Maybe someday she'd manage an accomplishment that would impress her older sister. Just not today, apparently. She shoved the sketchbook back into her satchel, tugged the flap shut, and sighed. Sometimes it was difficult to believe last winter had really happened, especially at school where the washed-out light made her feel as if she were living in a sepia photograph instead of real life.

Lulu shivered . . . but that was behind them now. A real, bright, wonderful summer stretched ahead. She leaned out of the streetcar again to soak in the evening radiance.

A group of children ran down the street, waving wooden cutlasses and wearing pirate hats—costumes, no doubt, for the upcoming festival. Shrieks of laughter echoed over the trolley's squeaks and huffs.

Lulu tensed, twisting around toward the receding group. That wasn't laughter. She jumped up and hung on the cord to signal to the streetcar driver that she wanted to stop.

"What are you doing?" Frankie grabbed an upright as the trolley car lurched to a halt.

"Somebody's screaming!" Lulu scooped up her satchel. Frankie remained unmoved. "And?"

"If you were screaming in the street, wouldn't you want someone to check on you?" Lulu demanded. Why couldn't Frankie follow *her* lead, for once?

"No!" Frankie folded her arms, her expression a mix between exasperation and amusement. "Little kids scream all the time when they're playing! I'd rather be left alone unless there was an obvious problem."

"It wasn't that kind of screaming." Concealing her irritation at Frankie's lack of support, Lulu jumped out of the trolley and headed back up the street the way they'd come. Frankie grumbled under her breath, but followed.

Lulu tried to make herself hope there wasn't actually a problem, but couldn't quite manage it. If she were making a mistake, Frankie's amused tolerance would be hard to bear.

The younger children had halted by the time they caught up with them. One boy of about five had scrambled into the fork of a tree beside the road and clung there at Lulu's eye level, shrieking and crying, while the others, a boy and girl

several years older, whacked the trunk with wooden swords. Both wore half-masks and three-cornered captain's hats.

"Better stay up in your crow's nest, bilge rat!" the boy sneered, "or you'll—"

"Excuse me," Lulu said, stepping forward. "What are you playing?"

Both children jumped, looking guilty beneath their masks. The little boy in the tree, who appeared to be their brother, screamed and tried to climb higher.

"Is that her?" he squealed. "Is that Captain Ale?" Though he spoke in English, he pronounced the name with its Spanish inflection: *Ah-ley*.

"No, it's not. You can come down. We were just fooling." Sheepish, the girl swung her toy cutlass at the sidewalk.

"Captain Ale?" Lulu asked, taken aback. "Do you mean Alejandra Buenaventura?" Like everyone else in High Town, she'd grown up around legends of the fearless pirate queen who'd once ruled local waters. Lulu couldn't think of anyone less like herself.

"All those pirate decorations are for advertising," she reassured the boy, seeing his obvious fright. "Ale Buenaventura went down with her ship over two hundred years ago."

"*If* she ever existed," Frankie put in.

"She did exist." The older boy's voice was husky.

The girl pulled off her mask. “And she’s back.”

Gusting wind and fiery sunset flooded the streets, snapping the decorative bunting. All three younger children’s faces looked solemn. Lulu shifted uncomfortably.

“If you’re trying to scare *us*,” Frankie said, the corners of her mouth lifting, “you’re going to have to do better than that.”

Quickly, Lulu tried to look unconcerned.

“But it’s true,” the girl said, widening her eyes. “Captain Ale is looking for a new crew to pressgang, to replace the one that betrayed her! If you go out alone after dark, she’ll spirit you off to her galleon to hunt for her lost treasure. We were making sure Tarq could run fast enough to escape her.”

“Yeah,” said the little boy, sliding down from the tree. “I’m fast!”

“Good to know. Come on, Lulu.” Frankie turned to leave.

Lulu wavered. Despite her unease, part of her wanted to hear more of this ghost story. The children swarmed around her, eager to defend their truthfulness.

“Honest!” The girl tugged at her sleeve. “You better not go too far by yourself—you might get taken!”

“We’re not lying!” her brother chimed in. “At night you can hear Captain Ale calling for her crew! And I know a girl who saw her, really saw her, out on Cayo Tormenta—”

“You’re telling me you know someone who actually saw a ghost pirate?” Frankie demanded, whirling.

“Well, I know someone who knows someone who did.”
The boy looked down.

“That’s called ‘hearsay,’” Frankie said. “And anyway—”
She broke off.

Lulu’s heart turned over inside her chest as a high, keening wail rose on the wind.