

PIRATES OF DARKSEA

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For Bea

Little Crab

Windwhistle

Ballista

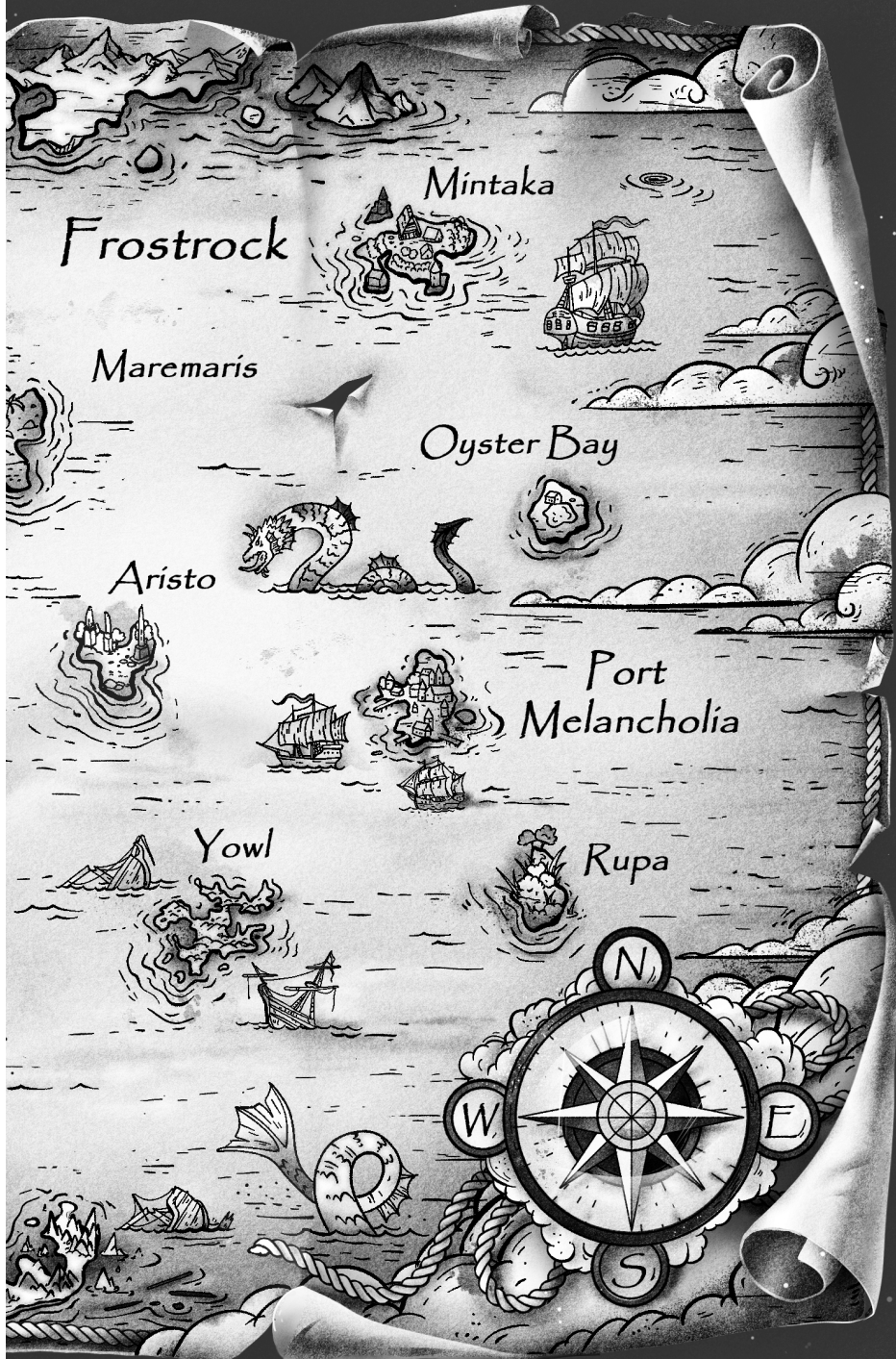
Turtle Roost

Volcana

Fortuna

The Devil's Grin





Frostrock

Mintaka

Maremaris

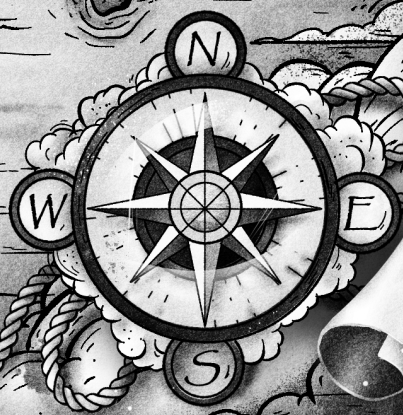
Oyster Bay

Aristo

Port
Melancholia

Yowl

Rupa



Prologue

The Stardust Kingdom

Deep in the heart of the Atlantic Ocean, where the full moon paints the waves silver and dolphins leap over the horizon, there lies a secret kingdom called Darksea. It is ruled by a pirate king.

In Darksea, islands sprawl like lily pads, while towering ships sail the straits between them. Every night, stardust falls from the sky and gathers in pools. At dawn, the Stolen Sunrise, captained by King Thorne O'Malley, casts its mighty net, and gathers this magical dust from the sea. It is delivered in huge chests to every island, where it is used to build homes and grow food, to mend aches, and occasionally to make mischief.

The Pirate King is a protector, not a plunderer. He keeps only a small jar of stardust for himself, for Thorne O'Malley's courage is

greater than any magic. His bravery has turned him into a living legend, a leader so beloved in his kingdom that turtles clamber on top of each other to watch him sail by. Mermaids sing about him in their kelp forests, and the children of Darksea swap tales of his epic battles as they play pretend pirates along the strand.

Sometimes one of these stories finds its way over the horizon and into our world. Usually, it becomes little more than a fairytale, whispered to sleepy children at bedtime, but every once in a while it falls upon ears that decide not just to believe in Darksea, but to look for it. And when that happens, the Atlantic waves grow a little bigger, the midnight moon glows a little brighter, and, to a lucky few, the Pirate King of Darksea offers a great, life-changing adventure.



Chapter One

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

On a cold, blustery school night in the middle of September, Christopher Reid tiptoed downstairs and slipped outside the front door of number 7 Bellflower Lane, with the sneakiness of a jewel thief. He retrieved his school bag from a nearby hydrangea bush and peeked inside, making sure everything was still there – a spare pair of socks and clean underwear, his favourite hoody, a notebook and pen, a water bottle and a pack of granola bars for the journey.

Satisfied that nothing had been disturbed, he shrugged it on and broke into a jog, leaving the garden gate swinging on its hinges behind him.

It was almost midnight, and there wasn't a minute to waste.

But he'd barely reached the third street lamp on Bellflower Lane before a familiar voice rang out behind him. 'WAIT FOR ME!'

Christopher winced. A quick glance over his shoulder revealed his little brother, Max, thundering towards him in his bright green dinosaur pyjamas. He had shoved on Mum's clunky pink crocs in a panic, which made the patter of his footsteps sound like a runaway horse.

'Shh!' hissed Christopher. 'You're going to blow my cover!'

Max huffed as he ran. 'I'm ... coming ... too!'

'You don't even know where I'm going!'

Max juddered to a stop. His usually pale cheeks were bright red, and his sandy hair was sticking up in every direction. 'You can tell me when we get there.'

Christopher frowned as he considered his little brother. Max was two years younger than him, but he was twice as stubborn, which meant there was no sense in arguing with him. And anyway, there wasn't time.

Christopher sighed. 'Fine. But you have to stay quiet until we get down to the sea.'

Max's big blue eyes got even bigger. 'What's down at the sea?'

Christopher's gaze darted. 'Pirates.'

'Pirates?' Max half shrieked.

'Shhhh!'

Max flinched. 'Sorry.'

Christopher quickened his footsteps, urging his brother to follow. 'Well, a pirate king, actually,' he confided. 'He sails on a ship called the *Stolen Sunrise*.'

Max puffed his cheeks up. He looked like he was about to explode with excitement. His hurried footsteps echoed the drumbeat in Christopher's chest. The Pirate King was coming *tonight*. Christopher could feel it in his bones. The full moon was brighter than he'd ever seen it, the rush of the ocean so loud it sounded like it was calling out to him.

'His name is Captain Thorne O'Malley,' Christopher went on. 'And he lives in a place far away from here.'

'Like ... *France*?'

'Further than that,' said Christopher. 'It's called Darksea. It's on the other side of the horizon.'

Max made a soft *ooh*.

Christopher nodded. It was so far away he could scarcely imagine it, but when he first read about it a couple of weeks ago, he decided he very much liked the sound of it. 'Darksea is full of magical islands. And since Thorne O'Malley is the King, it's his job to protect them. He's fought sea dragons and kelpies and giant, stinging eels. Once he even killed a kraken and then ate it for dinner!'

Max made a slightly louder *oooh*. ‘What’s a kraken?’

‘No idea. But it sounds scary.’

‘And yummy.’

‘Thorne O’Malley’s *really* brave. And he’s generous. He shares the magic of Darksea with everyone.’

‘Like how Nan shares her biscuit tin with us on Sundays?’

‘Exactly.’ Christopher’s voice hitched. ‘*And* every once in a while, when the full moon hangs low over Galway Bay, and the midnight sea behaves itself, Captain Thorne O’Malley and the crew of the *Stolen Sunrise* cross the horizon and sail into our world. If we look hard enough tonight, we just might spot him. And if we’re lucky, Maxie ... like, *really* lucky, he might see us too.’

‘And then what?’ whispered Max.

Christopher drew a breath, excitement fluttering in the pit of his stomach. ‘And then we’ll get to go on a pirate adventure.’

Max skidded to a sudden stop. ‘Hang on ...’ he said, suspiciously. ‘Were you going to leave me behind?’

Christopher bit his lip, feeling a little guilty. ‘I thought it might be too scary for you.’

Max glowered at him.

‘Well, you’re afraid of Ms Hannity next door.’

‘She has no teeth, and she smells like cheese!’

'You screamed at the butterfly that flew into your bedroom last week!'

'It gave me a fright!'

Christopher hesitated. 'Being a pirate *is* frightening, Max.'
Max folded his arms. 'I won't be scared if you're there.'

Christopher smiled. The truth was, the idea of a pirate adventure was a lot more fun with his little brother in tow. As long as they stuck together, they'd be all right.

'Come on then. Let's go.' They hurried down the hill and past a row of dark, spindly houses, then the dog park, and the big pink mansion with all the crooked trees, until at last the promenade unfurled before them.

The tide was out, the shoreline glimmering under the silver moon.

'Race you!' said Christopher, but Max was already running in his oversized crocs. Christopher chased after him, vaulting over a beached jellyfish and a slumbering crab, before easily overtaking him. Max cast a handful of seashells in Christopher's direction, but he dodged them easily.

Christopher fired back, flinging a pile of seaweed on to his brother's head until both of them were laughing so hard they had to stop and catch their breath. Down at the shoreline, with the waves kissing the toes of their shoes, Max brushed the mop of seaweed from his hair and peered out to sea. 'Where is he?'

'Just wait,' said Christopher. 'He'll be here. I know it.'

After all, half of wishing for something was *believing* in it first.

So the Reid brothers waited. And waited. And *waited*. When they got tired, they sat down on the sand. After a while, Max's head lolled against Christopher's shoulder. Midnight had long since gone and the hand on Christopher's watch was ticking ever closer to 1 a.m. When his legs had gone numb from the cold, and he could hardly keep his eyes open, Christopher decided, with a heavy heart, that it was time for Plan B. He reached for his notebook. Under the light of the full moon, with his brother snoring on his shoulder, he began to write.

Dear Captain O'Malley

My name is Christopher Reid and I'm almost eleven years old. I've never met a pirate, but two weeks ago I found a book about you in a second-hand shop, while Mum was selling our haunted armchair (that's a whole other story). The book was covered in dust, but I cleaned it off and taped the loose pages.

My teacher says you're not real. According to him, all your adventures are fairytales, and magical ships like the Stolen Sunrise don't exist. But he also says that stamp-

collecting is fun and learning long division is useful, so I have my doubts about his opinions.

And there's something else too. I think I saw you once when I was little. Nan and I were spending the evening picking up rubbish on the beach (she's kind of a goody-two-shoes). It was the least fun I've ever had in my life, and I've had my tonsils removed. Anyway, when the moon came out, it was so big it turned everything silver and, when I looked out at the sea, I saw a pirate ship! Nan squinted but she couldn't see that far without her glasses, and by the time we found them in the pocket of her cardigan, the ship was gone.

But I know what I saw.

Next month is my eleventh birthday and I want to go on a real-life adventure to Darksea. I'm a really good swimmer, I don't mind not eating vegetables for a while and I've been practising sailor knots on my shoelaces. I believe in you. Please come and find me.

Yours admiringly

Christopher Reid

No. 7 Bellflower Lane (house, not ship)

PS I'd like to bring my brother, Max, with me. He's two years younger than me, but he's smart for his age and small enough to sleep in a barrel, if needs be.

Christopher read over his letter for spelling mistakes. Satisfied, he carefully rolled it up and stuck it inside his empty water bottle before screwing the cap back on.

Max stirred awake as his brother stood up.

He frowned at the sea. 'He didn't come?'

'Not this time,' said Christopher, refusing to let his hopes be dampened. 'But he will.'

With the water bottle in his fist, Christopher clambered out on to the rocks. 'All right, Maxie. Make a wish.'

Max closed his eyes and puffed his cheeks up.

Christopher took a deep breath, then hurled his letter fast and far into the belly of the Atlantic Ocean. The waves rushed in to claim it, as though they knew exactly what to do.

TWO YEARS LATER



Chapter Two

THE UNEXPECTED PARROT

At 11.02 p.m., in the leafy suburb of Bellflower Lane, Max Reid was sitting in his bedroom, counting the change in his walrus money bank, when the moon disappeared. One minute it was as round and bright as one of his coins, and the next it was slipping from the sky, like a raindrop sliding down his windowpane.

Max set the walrus down and crawled across his bed to look outside. It was a school night and, even though he was supposed to be asleep, he was wide awake, worrying about his brother. Again. And now this – a disappearing moon! He craned his neck, squinting until he could just trace its silvery arch skulking behind the distant rooftops.

‘Weird,’ he said, falling back on his heels.

Max ignored the strange shiver along the back of his neck and returned to his walrus, shaking it by a tusk until the last coin fell out. He flattened out the notes and set them on the window sill, before carefully arranging the coins in little stacks. His entire life savings sat before him, including the money Nan had given him for Christmas and the pocket money he earned from mowing Ms Hannity's lawn.

All told, it added up to €53.27, a wonky paperclip and three rubber bands. Max opened his journal and jotted down the amount. Then he frowned. It might be just enough to buy the new *Spider-Man* game to cheer Christopher up, but it was a far cry from the miracle his brother really needed.

At least according to Mum.

She had come back from visiting Christopher in the hospital a few hours ago, and was so distracted by her phone call with Dad that she hadn't noticed Max standing at the door of the open fridge, looking for the ketchup.

The scans aren't good, John. The treatment isn't working.

Max had frozen with his hand around the bottle, the chill from the fridge settling in his bones. When Christopher's scans were bad, the world was grey. Right now it was darker than it had ever been.

Dr Fischer says we need a new treatment plan. A new direction.

Oh, darling, I think we need a miracle.

Mum went into the utility room for a little cry then, and Max had to stick his fingers in his ears and hum until his heart stopped hammering in his chest.

Staring at the pitiful heap of coins on his window sill now filled him with the same feeling of dread. What good was the new *Spider-Man* game if Christopher couldn't come home to play it? He thought of his brother, alone in his hospital room in his woolly blue hat, and felt hopelessly and utterly useless.

Just then, a street lamp outside flickered. A screech tore through the night, and a bright red parrot came soaring past his bedroom window. Max quickly flung it open and stuck his head out into the night – just in time to see the bird hover for a moment above the front door before coming to rest on Christopher's window ledge. It ruffled its feathers, then tapped its beak against the glass.

The light in Christopher's bedroom was off. There was no one there to answer.

The bird tapped again. A little impatiently, Max thought.

Max had seen parrots before, of course. He had even held one. Two years ago, before Christopher started feeling dizzy and tired all the time, they had gone to the zoo for his eleventh birthday. Max had giggled around his raspberry-ripple

ice cream while his brother posed for a special birthday portrait with a cockatoo on each shoulder and a parrot balancing on one leg on his head.

Christopher had balanced on one leg too.

The parrot currently sitting on Christopher's window ledge was just like that one, covered in magnificent red plumage, brushed through with blue and yellow feathers. Its beak was raised as it looked expectantly at the glass.

'AHOY HOY!' squawked the bird.

Max jolted in surprise. 'Hey, feathers!' he hissed. 'Keep it down! You're going to wake up Mum and Dad!'

The bird tapped the glass again. 'AHOY HOY!'

'That bedroom is empty!' Max felt a bit silly talking to the parrot, but he couldn't see a way around it. 'My brother's not home. And we have a cat,' he added, threateningly. 'If you don't get out of here, Bowie's going to come outside and eat you!'

The bird stopped squawking and turned to stare at Max. Max's cheeks began to tingle. He could see now that one of the parrot's eyes was small and beady, but the other sparkled like a tiny glittering star. Definitely not the same one from the zoo then.

The street lamp flickered as the parrot took off again.

This time it landed on Max's window sill.

'Shoo!' Max reeled back into his bedroom. 'You're not coming in here!'

Things were bad enough already. The last thing Mum and Dad needed was a parrot screeching and pooping around their house. But the bird settled on the ledge, and stared at Max with its diamond-bright eye. Max was so taken aback that he didn't notice the scroll tied to the bird's leg until it raised its foot and offered it to him.

'What on earth is this?' he muttered, reaching out to retrieve it.

The parchment was rough around the edges, and tied with several strands of dark red hair. It reminded Max of the paper he'd stained with an old tea bag in art class to make it look ancient. This one didn't smell like old tea leaves though. It smelt like the sea. The note was scrawled so badly, he had to squint to make out the words.

Dear Christopher

Apologies for the delay, but I'm sure you would agree that a late invitation is better than one that does not come at all. I'm writing to let you know there's an opening on my ship for a cabin boy. I'm looking for someone clever and brave, with just the right amount of pluck, to help me with a top-secret task.

If you can spare some mettle, meet me on the bay under the full moon tonight. Squawk will show you the way. The magic will do the rest.

*Yours expectantly
Captain O'Malley*

PS A pirate's word is good as gold. I'll make it worth your while.

Max read the letter three times. Then he pinched himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming. Was this *really* from Captain Thorne O'Malley, the pirate whose legend had brought Christopher and Max down to the bay at midnight more times than he could count, both of them staring at the murky horizon until their eyes hurt? The pirate Christopher swore he had seen when he was a small boy, but who never came, no matter how hard they wished for it.

Max glanced at the parchment, his gaze snagging on one fateful line: *The magic will do the rest*. If the Pirate King *was* real, that meant Darksea was real too. A place full of magic and adventure. Max looked at his walrus, now beached on its side. All of his worldly possessions and desperate hope couldn't help Christopher now. But *magic ...*

Wasn't magic the most important ingredient in a miracle?
The *only* ingredient, really?

And if this letter – and the starry-eyed bird that carried it – came from a place full of magic, then maybe a miracle was possible.

'READY TO SAIL?' squawked the well-named Squawk.

'Shhh! And *no*. Of course not.' Max rolled up the scroll and set it back on the window sill. 'I can't just *leave*. And besides, this letter isn't for me, it's for my brother, Christopher.'

Squawk ruffled his feathers. 'FINDERS KEEPERS!
FINDERS KEEPERS!'

Max stared at the parrot. It *almost* felt like the bird *had* understood him. 'Are you really talking to me?'

The parrot cocked its head as if to say, *Who else?*

The street lamp flickered again. Squawk jumped through the window, sending the coins flying everywhere. Before Max could stop him, he snapped his beak around the bundle of notes and took off into the night.

'Hey!' Max grabbed the scroll and tried to swat him. 'That's my money!'

'FINDERS KEEPERS!' cried Squawk, as he landed on the street lamp.

Max sprang into action, shrugging on his hoody over his pyjamas and jamming his feet into the first pair of shoes he could find, which just so happened to be his

muddy football boots. There was no time for socks! He raced downstairs, past the dishes teetering in the sink, the kitchen table strewn with ledgers, and the pile of stamped letters by the front door.

He was halfway to the street when he realised he still had the scroll in his hand. He shook it angrily at the bird. 'Get down here!' he hissed.

'FINDERS KEEPERS!' Squawk took off in a fan of rainbow feathers, leaving Max no choice but to chase after him.

The soccer boots made Max hobble a bit, but he didn't dare slow down. 'Stop! You sneaky thief!'

The parrot glided high over the rooftops of Bellflower Lane, but Max knew these winding streets like the freckles on his cheeks. Within minutes, he was by the water, where the promenade curved all the way around the bay, gathering up an armful of the Atlantic Ocean.

The parrot was heading towards the old diving tower, which jutted up from the sea like a yellow fist. During the summer, Christopher and Max used to cannon-ball off the top board to see which of them could make the biggest splash. Once, Max had misjudged the distance and smashed his foot on the rocks, shattering his ankle in three places. He had come up wailing like a banshee, and had to be hauled away on a stretcher. Christopher had ridden

with him in the ambulance, wailing in harmony with the siren until Max ended up laughing so hard he threw up.

Max hurtled out of the memory as he reached the tower. Squawk was perched on a rowing boat bobbing near the bottom of it, with Max's life savings still clasped firmly in his beak.

'I'm coming down! Don't move!' Max kept his eyes on his feet as he carefully scooted down the sea-slimed rocks. There was a chill in the wind, making him shiver in his pyjama bottoms, but in his studded boots, he could run much better on the sand.

The parrot waved the money back and forth, like a matador taunting a bull. Max marched across the beach, but when he rounded the diving tower, he stopped short.

The moon was bigger than he'd ever seen.

And there was a strange shadow floating in front of it.

'No way.'

Max could just make out a long hull, three jutting masts and huge billowing sails. There was a flag rippling at the very top of the ship, the moonlight picking out the outline of a golden sun.

'Is that – it looks like – but it *can't* be ...' Max clutched the scroll, his throat suddenly bone dry. 'That looks an awful lot like a pirate ship.'

'That's because it is a pirate ship,' said the parrot.

Max gasped. 'Hang on. You can *talk*? Like, *talk talk*?'

'I'm also really good at Jenga.'

Max's mouth fell open.

'I know,' said the bird mildly. 'It's impressive.'

'No, it's ... well, it's impossible. This whole talking and understanding thing, I mean.'

'You'll get used to it.' Squawk dropped the money in the boat. 'On to more important matters. Captain O'Malley is waiting. Are you ready to set sail?'

Max hovered on the shoreline. The *Stolen Sunrise* bobbed on the bay as if it were waiting for him. The scroll warmed in his fist. Whatever this was – the parrot and the ship and the promise of magic – it couldn't be a coincidence. Christopher's wish was finally coming true.

But Christopher wasn't here to claim it.

Max chewed on his lip, waiting for a flicker of courage to take hold of him. If his brother were here now, they'd be racing down to the boat, grabbing their adventure with both hands, Christopher charting their course, and Max following behind. Max didn't know how to lead. He didn't *want* to lead.

'Is it true what the note says?' he said uncertainly. 'Is there really magic in Darksea?'

The parrot's starry eye glittered. 'How do you think we got here in the first place?'

Max licked his lips. 'And if I come with you ... if I help the captain ... there'll be a reward?'

'There's only one way to find out.'

Max took those seven words and turned them into a decision.

'Right then.' With his heart still hammering in his chest, Max stuck the scroll in his pocket, and stepped into the little boat.