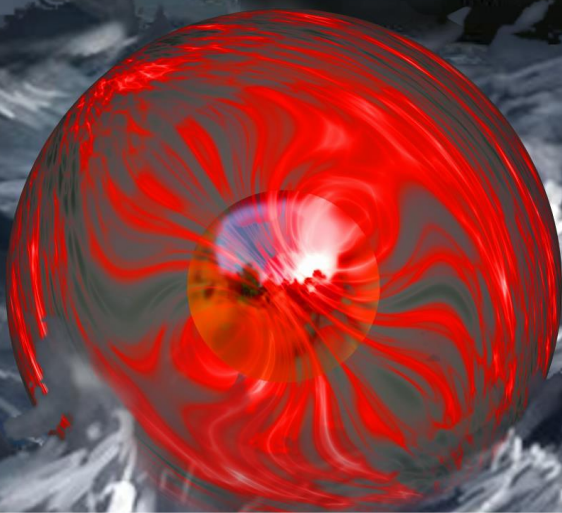


POSSESSED BY EVIL, WITH A SECRET & DEADLY MISSION...

THE STOWAWAY



CLYDE EDWARDS

The Stowaway

A Novel of Horror

Clyde Edwards

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Chapter One

Boston, Massachusetts 1808

His head was in the warehouse office, but his heart was at sea.

So often, this was the case with Kit Cabot, eldest and only son of Edmund Cabot, and heir to the Cabot fortune. He had the thin, gangly body of a youth approaching manhood, with legs like sticks in his close-fitting breeches, a skinny neck sticking out of his cravat and a pale face that still didn't quite need shaving. His elbows poked at the sleeves of his jacket, and his hands and feet were too big for the rest of his body, like the paws on a puppy destined to grow into a wolfhound.

At the moment, he sat hunched over a desk in the dusty, dingy little room that served as Cabot Freight Company's main office. As usual, his right thigh, knee and calf all throbbed with a dull pain that had become his constant friend ever since he'd injured it as a boy. Although it was tolerable today, the pain in his leg joints and muscles often became so bad that he wished he had no leg at all. He sighed, and massaged his thigh absently, and twirled the quill pen between his fingers, and tried to see if any of the ink blots he'd made on the ledger even slightly matched each other in size and shape, and fought to keep an interested look on his face.

"The Dauntless docked this morning. She's an East Indiaman...came in two weeks ahead of schedule," Mr. Graham, the company book-keeper, muttered, informing the room at large of facts that Kit considered duller than a convent. Kit glanced up at the two older, grim-looking men who were sitting nearby, stooped over ledgers and papers, reviewing figures and making little notations, and yawned.

"Her cargo?" his father, Edmund Cabot, asked.

The book-keeper paged through a sheaf of stained, crinkled papers he was holding. "Coffee and sugar."

The elder Cabot made a notation in the ledger with a quill pen. "How many tons?"

"Five-hundred forty-eight in sugar, another four-hundred sixty-five in coffee."

Edmund began a reply, but then broke off in a fit of coughing. Like his son, he hadn't the strongest of constitutions, evident in his blood shot eyes and cheeks hollowed and yellow from years of illness. The work-worn black breeches and dark brown coat he wore only emphasized the sallowness of his complexion. Kit sat up a little straighter and peered at his father, concerned for a moment, but then Edmund's phlegm subsided.

"Any passengers?" his father asked.

"A Mrs. Harrington, Mr. Folkes, Mr. Stevens..."

Edmund and the book-keeper continued to discuss details about the passengers, as well as other ships and their imports, and Kit knew he should be writing it all down. But the day had been long, and the room had no light other than a desk lamp and a few lanterns, encouraging sleep or daydreaming at the very least. Kit heard a buoy ringing in the harbor, and it was such a lonely sound that his mind began to wander, and he thought about how he had no friends either, that his boyhood injury had helped sentence him to a life stooped over the books, just like his father. Frowning, he realized he was doodling along the margins of his accounting ledger; festooning it with curlicues and geometric shapes and tiny sketches of clipper ships...

“Kit! Pay attention. Are you taking notes as I’ve asked?”

Kit twitched at the sound of his father’s voice and immediately began writing figures in the ledger, even as he glanced up to find Edmund staring his way, his eyebrows lowered and disappointment glinting in his watery eyes.

“Are you?” Edmund pressed.

“Yes, uh, I’m sorry. I’m taking notes, of course.”

Edmund’s eyes narrowed. Without warning, he slammed his ledger down on the desk, stood up, and stalked over to scrutinize Kit’s ledger. After a second or two, he slowly began to shake his head. “You’re not taking notes. You’re daydreaming.”

Kit swallowed and kept his gaze directed downward on the doodles that had gotten him into trouble. He didn’t dare reply, for he knew he’d been caught, fair and square. Any dissembling on his part would only get him into more hot water.

Mr. Graham, for his part, politely turned his attention to the sheaf of papers he was holding and studied them as if they contained an as-of-yet undiscovered chapter of the New Testament.

“We’ve talked about this before,” Edmund said, his voice rising in volume.

“Yes, Father.”

“You need to learn this business as best as you’re able.”

“I know, Father.”

Mr. Graham looked up from his papers with pained expression. “It’s late, Mr. Cabot. We’ve been working all day. Perhaps it’s time to take a break.”

Edmund drew himself up to his full height and took in a deep breath, in the manner of a politician preparing to lecture the poor on the benefits of taxation. “We don’t have time to ‘take a break,’ Mr. Graham. As unpleasant a fact as it is, you know it to be true. Four ships docked today, and we need to complete the ledgers for Customs before we leave for the evening. Tomorrow, another four ships will dock, and we’ll have an entirely new set of problems to deal with.”

“Yes, Mr. Cabot,” the book-keeper replied in placating tones. “I do understand. It’s part and parcel of managing a shipping company.”

“And you, Kit? Do *you* understand?”

His father was studying him again with that disappointed gaze, and Kit wished Edmund understood his *son* better. Experience told him he ought not to argue with his father, for it was a contest he rarely, if ever, won; but he suddenly had a deep-seated need to be truthful, just this once. Perhaps now that he had nearly grown to manhood--he stood ready to turn eighteen within a fortnight or two--Edmund might listen closely enough to realize that his heart lie elsewhere than in the Cabot Shipping Company books.

“I’m not going to mince words. I consider this work tedious. More than once, I’ve found myself wishing I was doing something else.”

Edmund drew back as if he’d been slapped. “Such as?”

A pause ensued, during which Kit struggled with what he ought to say, versus what he dared to say. The harbor bell tolled dolefully, counting out the seconds, and both Mr. Graham and his father stared at him with raised eyebrows.

Kit opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again.

“Yes?” his father asked, his voice filled with mockery.

Kit closed his mouth, this time for good. How could he possibly tell his father that he wanted to buy his own ship and sail it as part of the Cabot Shipping Company fleet, just like his Uncle John? Not only would Edmund laugh himself into his grave over the idea, but he’d ask where Kit thought to get the money from, and *that* was a topic Kit didn’t dare broach. Edmund didn’t know he’d been helping Uncle John smuggle goods into Boston and had been receiving a hefty allowance for it. Kit was known for having a lively imagination, but even *he* couldn’t imagine what his father would do if he found out.

His father sighed with obvious satisfaction at Kit’s continued silence. “You may think it a pity, Kit, but you haven’t much choice other than to learn the family business. You’re my only son—my only child. I haven’t anyone else to take over for me once I retire.”

Kit nodded slowly. He understood his obligations as the eldest and only Cabot son. He just wished the yoke of familial responsibility didn’t feel so tight around his neck.

His father glanced through the office window, at the dark shadows in the warehouse beyond. He appeared to be searching for the right words. When his focus returned to Kit, his gaze had softened. “And besides that, there is the problem with your leg. It hasn’t gotten any better, despite all of the treatments. You’re unfortunately without any other options than this position, even if you weren’t my only, eldest son.”

Kit grimaced. His knee flared with pain, as if in league with his father.

Edmund gazed at his son for a second or so longer, and then walked back to the desk, where he sat heavily. "I can think of worse fates for a young gentleman, other than having to run a shipping fleet with over ten vessels, and eventually enjoy the profits from their imported cargo."

Kit's grimace deepened. The throbbing in his leg joined with an abrupt burning in his gut, one he identified as resentment. "I've worked with you in these offices for two years now, Father. I've learned how to maintain the books like you asked, toured the docks, met with our ships' captains and helped you and Mr. Graham prepare the necessary cargo reconciliations for Customs. And yet, you still seem so displeased with me..."

"I'm aware that you've worked hard," Edmund allowed, after a long hesitation, "and your mother and I appreciate it."

Kit shook his head, dissatisfied with his father's miserly admission. "I'm trying to say that I know what your expectations are of me, and I'll do my best to satisfy them. Haven't I always done so?"

Edmund caught Kit's gaze then, and they both stared at each other.

Kit looked away first.

The harbor bell continued to toll mournfully.

Mr. Graham cleared his throat. "Your brother's ship docked this morning, Mr. Cabot. The Apollyon came in on high tide."

Kit grew very still. His gut clenched again, this time with excitement. Uncle John was back...*finally*...and had no doubt brought a fine cargo with him too. That meant he'd need to sneak around some, and falsify the ledgers in order to disguise the receipt of the smuggled rum. It also meant Uncle John would pay him for his trouble, and he'd be one step closer to buying that clipper ship.

At times, Kit wondered what life would be like without his uncle in it. Doubtless, he mused, it would be completely lacking in intrigue and terribly boring as a consequence. He had no illusions about his uncle—John Cabot was alternately a rakehell, a thug, and a womanizer; among other things. But he was also a damned good sea captain and he treated Kit like an equal, making him the one bright spot in Kit's otherwise dreary life.

Edmund, however, wasn't so kindly disposed toward John. "So, that scapegrace has finally returned, had he? And only what...four weeks late?"

"I believe so," Mr. Graham replied.

"We're lucky. This time it took him a mere month to become bored with those West Indian whores."

Kit squashed his smile lest his father see it, and think Uncle John's whoring amused him. "At least he didn't run into any British or French warships."

"Indeed," Mr. Graham echoed vehemently.

"He'd better have a damned good cargo this time. I'm tired of his bringing back moldy cotton and barrels of inedible fish," Edmund grouched.

Kit tried for a nonchalant tone that belied the thrill he was feeling. "Will he be coming to dinner tonight?"

"Yes, yes, your delightful uncle will be coming to dinner tonight. Hopefully he won't teach you any more bad habits than he already has."

"I'm interested to know how the voyage went," Kit ventured. "Uncle John always seems to have an escapade of some kind."

"Bad luck follows him around," his father pronounced dourly. "I'm certain he'll have several hair-raising stories to entertain us with."

His thoughts focused on the potential barrels of smuggled rum, Kit cocked his head to one side. "Has the Apollyon's cargo been unloaded and brought to the warehouse yet?"

"It was delivered this afternoon," the book-keeper replied.

"Why don't I start reconciling the delivered cargo with the Apollyon's manifest?" Kit offered. "If he's brought back moldy cotton and inedible fish, we'll know prior to dinner, and then we can take him to task tonight when he visits."

Edmund lifted an eyebrow. "If your doing so means you'll stop drawing silly figures around my facts and figures, I'm all for it."

Chapter Two

A few hours later, Kit was still checking and counting and double-counting the Apollyon's latest cargo delivery. His father and Mr. Graham had quit the warehouse hours before, and now he was standing with ledger and quill in hand, finalizing the figures and waiting for Mr. Whyte, the quartermaster and surgeon on board the Apollyon. The warehouse itself, although large, felt cramped with crates and barrels stacked from floor to ceiling, in every corner of the room; and his leg had gone from feeling painful to outright throbbing as he limped from stack to stack of crates.

He could hear the harbor buoy ringing louder in the warehouse, and it drew his attention to the grimy window which faced the harbor. Late day sunshine streamed through it, creating deep, dusty shadows in the warehouse and making the outside look like a beckoning paradise. As he shambled past, he paused to look outside. Several clipper ships sat in calm waters, their hulking frames painted red-gold beneath a setting sun. Their masts reached toward the clouds, with the rigging around them like nets keeping them earthbound. Their acres of sails were drawn down to prevent them from picking up any wind, and their great prows were nuzzled up against the docks and held there by thick ropes. He could almost feel their longing to return to the open sea, and their dismay at being bound and gagged so tightly to shore.

He absently rubbed his aching thigh. The pain he was feeling and the sense of the ships not being able to move brought back terrible recollections of his childhood...the schooner docked in the harbor, with him scrambling around the rigging...his Uncle John encouraging him to climb higher, and then the plummeting sensation as he slipped and fell to the deck...the leg brace made of wood and canvas, wrapped around him so tightly...in his bed, unable to move, feeling so embarrassed because he'd soiled the sheets...his mother at his bedside, reading *The Arabian Nights* to him in her gentle voice...the first, agonizing time he tried to stand up.

It had been ten years since the fateful day that had changed him from a rambunctious boy to a housebound shadow. Ten long years of struggling with the injured nerves in his leg muscles and joints. Ten years of insisting his mother stopping blaming Uncle John for his injury, of his father being disappointed in him. On some days, like this one, he wasn't certain what felt worse: the physical pain of his damaged leg or the emotional pain of the memories that haunted him still.

Determinedly, with a resolve honed by surviving many difficult times, he shook his head to dispel the thoughts. Today, he told himself, was a good day. Uncle John had returned with a hold full of smuggled goods. He'd help his uncle smuggle the goods into town beneath Customs' very nose and then collect his allowance. With his uncle's every trip, the money he'd saved grew steadily higher.

Someday, he'd have enough to buy one of those clippers in the harbor, and then he'd personally cut the ropes binding it to the docks.

"Mr. Cabot? Sir?"

The gruff male voice came out of the shadows. He saw that the warehouse door stood partially open. He squinted into the darkness in the corner of the warehouse and saw someone standing there: an older man, with great, bushy whiskers reaching down on either side of his face to his well-mended yet clean stock, a navy canvas coat, black breeches and polished boots, and a flat-topped, wide-brimmed hat designed to keep the sunshine and salt spray off his face. Around his waist he wore an old-fashioned sporran, which Kit knew to be a nod to his Scottish forebears, who'd demanded his allegiance despite the fact that their Highlander son chose to sail the seas rather than chase cattle.

Kit smiled widely. "Mr. Whyte! I heard you and my uncle returned this morning. Did you have a good voyage?"

"Aye, sir, we did indeed." Mr. Whyte took his cap off, revealing longish gray hair parted on the side and long enough to curl over his ears. He held his hat in his hands and nodded vigorously, but then looked off into the shadows, as if trying to find the right words to deliver some difficult news.

Kit's eyebrows drew together. "What's the matter, Mr. Whyte?"

Mr. Whyte reluctantly refocused on Kit. "'Twas an unusual run sir. The Captain...well, I shouldna be talking about him. But I'm worried."

"Worried about my uncle?"

"Aye, about yer uncle. But I don't want to speak badly o' the Captain."

Kit nodded, though he didn't really understand. "Thank you for the warning, then, Mr. Whyte. I'll definitely ask him about the voyage myself." He paused, and then looked to the left, and to the right, to make sure they'd neither be observed nor overheard. "Did you bring back any, er...cargo this time, that I'll need to manage?"

"The Captain said yer tae look for the crates and barrels branded with a star. They're the special ones."

"Tell my uncle that I'll take care of them as I usually do. Does he want me to leave the warehouse unlocked tonight?"

"If ye please, aye, around midnight."

"Very well, then. 'Twill be done," Kit promised.

Mr. Whyte lifted the lapel of his coat jacket, reached inside, and pulled out a small leather pouch. "This is fer ye. 'Tis the same amount as always."

He handed it to Kit, who took it with much satisfaction. The pouch felt heavy, and the jingling sound that the coins made was music to his ears.

“Go now, before someone sees you,” Kit said.

Mr. Whyte nodded and, his eyes wide, slipped out of the warehouse and into the darkening town. Kit waited until he'd disappeared, and then walked over to the window with the view of the harbor. As before, he focused on the clipper ships, but this time, he held a pouch full of money in his hand. He stared at the clipper and slowly, he tightened his fist around the pouch.

Chapter Three

The Cabot Townhouse had more in common with a mansion than an ordinary dwelling, with luxury running rampant throughout its three floors. Every architectural detail adhered as closely as possible with classical forms and gave a nod to Rome, Egypt, or Greece, as those cultures were ones that Edmund Cabot admired the most. As a result, Kit had spent his youth among sphinx heads, lion legs, and Corinthian columns decorated with Ormolu gilt. This luxury, however, was of the understated kind, with a monochrome theme of ivories, golds and browns; and the sedate colors reflected the sentiment at home—elegant, cool, and for God’s sake, no histrionics.

Kit was spending the evening at home, as he always did, eating with his parents. Tonight, though, he felt aquiver with anticipation, for Uncle John was back in Boston and would be joining them that night for dinner. He could barely restrain his enthusiasm at the idea. And so, after he and his parents had finished their aperitifs and had filed into the dining room for the actual dinner, and John Cabot still hadn’t arrived, he felt a disappointment so deep he feared it might swallow him up.

Edmund and his mother Charlotte took their usual places at the dinner table—Edmund at the head, and Charlotte to his right. Kit sometimes chose to sit at the foot of the table, which placed him a gratifying distance from his parents and freed him from having to engage in boring conversation. Tonight, though, he sat to his father’s left, because that particular seat gave him a view of the front entrance, directly opposite the dining room doors.

Luckily for Kit, no one was speaking tonight. The only sound in the dining room was the clank of silverware against plates. His father and mother had dressed formally, in honor of the fact that John Cabot planned to grace the townhouse with his presence. Kit, for his part, had thrown on simple trousers and a cutaway jacket, knowing that his uncle was more at home with roustabouts than pretentious dress and manners. A stoic, duty-obsessed servant named Hilda, who wore dresses as gray as a battle axe and had features just as sharp, was quietly attending the family.

Kit glanced at the helpings Hilda was spooning onto his plate, and sighed. “Has anyone besides me noticed that every Saturday evening, we eat turkey and mashed potatoes?” His voice sounded unnaturally loud in the quiet room.

His mother made a tut-tutting sound. “Kit, stop your complaining. Turkey is a perfectly reasonable thing to eat for dinner.”

“You don’t like turkey and potatoes?” Edmund added, between mouthfuls of food.

“I like them very well, but sometimes, it just seems odd, that we eat them every Saturday night,” he replied, wishing he had better words to express the flat-out strangeness that often colored dinners with his parents.

Edmund shook his head, as if there was no hope for Kit, and the three continued to eat quietly. Hilda moved among them, as quiet as a church mouse yet with gliding movements that would have made any snake jealous, topping off Edmund and Charlotte's glasses of wine and refilling Kit's plate. Kit looked at his turkey and potatoes with disgust, thinking that in ten years, not only would his leg continue to bother him, but his stomach would be protesting that he'd eaten far too much fowl.

Charlotte paused after taking a sip of wine, her brown ringlets perfectly styled around her face and gathered up in a little knot at the back of her head. "How has your leg been feeling lately?" she asked Kit.

He shrugged. "It's fine, Mother."

Smoothing the front of her rose gown, Charlotte paused to inspect her reflection in the mirror opposite her, then picked up her silverware and began eating again. The diamond and emerald rings she wore on her fingers flashed in the glimmer from the many candles in the chandelier. "I hope you're not climbing any ladders in the warehouse. You could hurt yourself even more, and considering your vertigo—" She broke off to shudder delicately, then continued. "—it could be a dangerous situation, indeed."

He winced. "Stop treating me like a child. I'm eighteen years old."

"I don't care how old you are, you don't speak to your mother that way," Edmund said sharply.

Sighing, he toyed with the mashed potatoes on his plate, making little mountains out of them. "I apologize, Mother."

With little further conversation, they finished dinner. Hilda began clearing away the plates. Edmund stretched back expansively in his chair and finished his wine, while Charlotte brushed at imaginary crumbs on her dress.

Kit, however, didn't feel quite so relaxed, and set his own glass down with more force than necessary. "I thought Uncle John was coming to dinner tonight."

Edmund sighed. "You know what your uncle is like. He says one thing, and does another."

Without warning, the front door banged open. Their gray-haired butler rushed forward to greet this intrusive guest, but then fell back when he saw who it was: John Cabot.

Like the true swashbuckler he was, John wore a dashing red jacket with a white jabot frothing between its lapels, a faded blue waistcoat with big gold buttons, black breeches, white stockings, and scuffed up black boots. His brown hair was parted on one side and curled down over his head in waves, with one tousled piece falling carelessly over his brow, and a thin mustache teased his upper lip. He wore three gold rings on each hand and had a gold hoop hanging from one earlobe—the last, an affectation Edmund positively despised.

Kit was up and out of his seat in a flash. With his parents' protestations ringing in his ears, he limped forward to greet his uncle. And when John saw Kit, he put his arms on his hips and gave him a charming grin, the same one that had lured more than one lady into his bed. "Why, if it isn't my favorite nephew, Kit Cabot."

Kit smiled with delight. "I'm your *only* nephew." He held his hand up to shake his uncle's hand, but John would have none of it, and enfolded Kit in a manly hug instead. He slapped Kit's back in a friendly way, and then the two made their way back into the dining room.

Kit returned to his seat and noticed how the room had suddenly become much brighter and more exciting with John's boisterous presence in it. His mother was now smiling and even Hilda had a ghost of a grin on her lips. Only his father seemed unimpressed, his expression suggesting John was more of a pest than a brother.

John was carrying a leather satchel over his shoulder. He walked over to an empty seat and dropped the satchel on the table. "I've returned."

"How wonderful for us," Edmund said sourly.

Charlotte gave her husband a displeased look, then fixed John with a smile. "It's good to have you home, John."

"It's good to *be* home, lovely Charlotte." John moved to Charlotte's side, took her hand and swept it up to his lips to kiss it. She tittered as he bent a warm look her way. Then, he shook Edmund's hand and sat down at the table, where he focused on Hilda. "Is there anything left for dinner, Hilda?"

Kit noticed with some amusement that a blush darkened Hilda's cheeks. The servant nodded her assent and hurried out of the dining room to fix John a plate.

"Well, brother, I assume you had a good voyage?" Edmund looked at John with an assessing gaze.

"Aye, 'twas a very good run," John replied. "Once again, I've a hold full of coffee and sugar, both of the finest grade. Boston's high society will have nothing to complain about."

"That truly *is* good news. Coffee and sugar imports have dropped on the whole. They're nearly unobtainable these days."

Kit knew that Edmund was referring Britain's war with Napoleon, and the way European navies were seizing the cargo of American merchantmen as the contraband of war. Just the previous year, Congress had passed the Embargo Act and, ironically, the law had reduced imports even more.

"Damned upstart Frenchman," John muttered, and then bent a smile upon Charlotte. "My apologies, dear sister-in-law."

From there, the talk turned to war with Britain, or the possibility of it, and Kit sat back to listen. He didn't care much for politics, although he supposed he should, given the way both the British and

French had seized the cargo from two of Cabot Shipping's clippers last year. However, for the moment, he just wanted to observe his uncle, for John had been quite late in returning from the West Indies, and he was curious to know why.

Besides that, something odd struck him about his uncle, something he must have subconsciously noticed right away but hadn't been able to place until this moment; and this gave him even more to be curious about. For John, a man who normally took great pride in his appearance, had several stains on both his coat and his jabot, suggesting he hadn't washed either in weeks. His cheeks also had a slightly hollowed appearance. But it was his teeth that arrested Kit's attention the most. They looked slightly grimy, and when John smiled, his gums appeared red and inflamed.

Still, his uncle ate with great zeal, so if he *were* feeling ill, it hadn't affected his appetite. And he acted like the uncle Kit knew: he ordered Hilda around, repeatedly demanded more wine, and spoke with his mouth full of food. In fact, he made such a spectacle of himself eating that eventually, Kit's mother and father fell silent too and, bemused, they all watched John ravage his plate.

John shook his head with delight, apparently over the turkey and potatoes in his mouth, and then looked up to gaze at Kit, his mother, and his father. "Why is everyone so quiet and still?"

"We've already finished eating, dear brother," Edmund informed him in stuffy tones, "and so now we have nothing to do but wait for you to finish. Besides that, it's quite fascinating to watch you eat. You do it with such...gusto."

"Uncle John does everything with gusto," Kit added defensively.

John flashed a smile toward Kit. "So, Kit, what have you been doing these past weeks? Learning how to manage the books?"

Kit shrugged. "That, and other things."

"What other things?" Edmund asked.

"Reading, mostly: Samuel Coleridge, Daniel Defoe, Antoine Galland."

John shook his head sadly. "You need to get outside more, nephew. Go for a walk. Ride horseback. Sail somewhere."

"Kit can't," Charlotte quickly interjected. "His leg—"

"I'm not a cripple," Kit broke in.

A lengthy paused ensued. Charlotte's thin pink lips curved downward, and Edmund gave Kit a narrow-eyed look. Kit sank a little further into his chair and wished he hadn't spoken so quickly.

John observed all of this with a raised eyebrow, then tossed back the remainder of the wine in his glass. "I'm finished. Let's go into the drawing room. As long as my sister-in-law doesn't mind, I'd like to bring out a few cigars."

"I don't mind at all," Charlotte allowed.

“Fine. Let’s repair to the drawing room, then.” Edmund stood and nodded at his wife. “Charlotte, please join us.”

Relieved that his uncle had so adeptly ended that awkward moment, Kit pushed back from the table and led the way into the drawing room. Edmund and Charlotte followed close behind, and John brought the rear, pausing long enough to grab his satchel and swing it back over his shoulder.

Chapter Four

The Cabot Townhouse drawing room was a much less formal affair than the dining room, with leather chairs scattered about, a whist table, shelves of books on one wall, floor-to-ceiling windows opposite the shelves, and a large fireplace on one side. Within the fireplace, a fire was crackling merrily. Charlotte sat primly on a chair next to the whist table and arranged her skirts artfully around her ankles, while Edmund took a seat near the windows. Kit preferred to feel the heat from the fire and sat near the fireplace. John, however, chose not to sit. Rather, he walked to a whiskey decanter on one of the shelves and selected three tumblers.

“Charlotte, some ratafia?” John asked, his back turned toward the three of them as he busied himself with pouring whiskey into the tumblers.

“No, thank you,” Charlotte replied.

John passed a tumbler to Edmund, and then held one out to Kit. Kit took it, despite his father’s raised eyebrows. John noticed the look Edmund gave his nephew and shrugged. “If the lad’s old enough to spend the entire day sorting through figures in the warehouse, then he’s old enough to drink. And smoke, too.”

His chin lifted slightly, Kit sipped the whiskey and fought down a need to cough. The liquid burned down his throat and created a pool of warmth in his stomach. He sighed with pleasure. He’d had whiskey before, of course, but his father didn’t approve of alcohol in general, and so most of his experience with the stuff was of a clandestine nature—him stealing a slug or too when his parents were out. It was gratifying to drink it now, out in the open, like a man.

John placed his tumbler on a side table and dug into his satchel, to produce three thick brown cigars. He handed one to Edmund, and the second to Kit; the third he kept for himself. Once again ignoring his brother’s raised eyebrow, he assisted Kit in lighting the cigar, and then Edmund. Soon, the three men were smoking cigars and drinking whiskey. Charlotte, although she’d agreed to the cigars, had her lips pressed tightly together.

Kit’s sense of gratification climbed higher, even as his eyes stung and watered from the cigar smoke. Now *this*, he thought, was an evening to remember. He relaxed back against his seat. “So, Uncle John, tell us about your last run to the West Indies. You had good weather throughout your voyage?”

“Aye, even though the hurricane season is upon us, we rode brisk trade winds down to the West Indies, but encountered nothing worse than that,” John replied. “The she-devils around the islands, though...they’re much more dangerous.”

Kit smiled. “She-devils?”

“She-devils,” John confirmed with a low, husky voice.

“Really, John...” Charlotte interjected.

John shot her an unrepentant grin. “I’m going to tell you an extraordinary story. ’Twas back when I was a young lad about your age, Kit.”

Kit nodded. “And?”

“We were cruising the Caribbean sea aboard a two-masted schooner, in the waters around the island of Tortuga. Do you know of it...Tortuga?”

“It’s a pirates’ lair, supposedly,” Kit offered.

“Aye, it is,” John confirmed. “Well, one evening, the seas became choppy. We had turned toward the coast to avoid a vicious storm, and had sailed not far from caves carved into the cliffside, when suddenly we heard a haunting song. There, sitting on a giant, barnacle-encrusted rock were three beautiful maidens.” He paused to give Charlotte a wink.

She looked to the heavens, as if praying for patience.

“Their song instantly enchanted my lonely shipmates, who steered towards the rock,” John continued softly. “But I blocked my ears with pieces of fabric that I tore from my neckerchief and leaped from my position on the weather deck. I grabbed the helm, set a safe course, and tied the wheel with rope. Then I fought off my shipmates until we were safely out of earshot.”

Edmund snorted.

“To this day,” John continued, undaunted, “I dream of those beautiful sirens every night.”

“That’s quite a tale,” Kit said.

“Aye, it is, and ‘tis all true. I swear it on my granny’s grave!”

This time Charlotte snorted, but Kit was all smiles. “You didn’t see any she-devils during this trip?”

John paused, and gave Kit an odd look, one that Kit couldn’t interpret. John’s gaze suddenly appeared dark and anxious, and Kit stiffened. His attention dropped to John’s mouth, to the teeth and gums that appeared to be rotting, and to his hollow cheeks. Just as he parted his lips to ask John—in all seriousness—if his health remained good, John’s gaze cleared and he began to regale them with ribald stories.

With a sigh, Kit told himself he was imagining things. He relaxed again, and enjoyed an evening full of tall tales.

John drank copiously throughout his storytelling, and insisted on refilling Edmund’s and Kit’s tumblers too, even though both of them hadn’t come anywhere close to keeping up with John. He even sang an off-color sailor’s song that had Charlotte blushing. And when John’s patter finally wound down, Kit wished with all of his heart that he could live the life his uncle had made for himself.

“Uncle, it sounds as though you had a marvelous run, even though you came in late,” Kit said, when silence had fallen over the room.

John stared moodily into his tumbler. “That it was, Kit. Better than the run prior to it, and undoubtedly more profitable, too.”

“I envy you,” Kit admitted. “I sometimes imagine what it would be like to captain my own ship and sail to faraway places.”

Edmund relit his cigar, which had gone out, and took a puff. “That would best remain a dream. You know that we need you at the helm of the company. We’ll leave the rough work to more able-bodied men.”

Kit looked down at his lap. For a moment, he forgot that his own cigar dangled between his fingers. Some ash from its tip dropped onto his breeches.

Charlotte stood and yawned. “Gentlemen, I’ve breathed enough cigar smoke for one evening. I’m going to retire.”

The men stood as well, and remained standing until she’d left the drawing room. Edmund then nodded to Kit and John. “It’s nearing midnight. I believe I’ll join her.”

John gave his brother a little smile. “Remember honor, Edmund.”

“Honor?”

“Get on her, brother, and stay on her.”

Shaking his head in disgust, Edmund left the drawing room. Kit chuckled and, finally remembering he was holding a cigar, flicked the rest of the ash into ashtray. John took a seat next to him.

“Your parents haven’t been easy for you to deal with lately,” his uncle observed in doleful tones.

“They’re smothering me with their damned expectations,” Kit agreed, slurring his words a little. “That’s why I’m more than happy to help you out when you arrive in port. I’m saving up the money you’re paying me, and someday, I’m going to buy my freedom.”

“They love you. They’re worried about you and that leg of yours. Because of that, they’re not letting you grow up.” John grabbed his tumbler of whiskey and took a big gulp before returning it to the side table. “Every day, I think back to that afternoon when I encouraged you to climb higher in the rigging. Every day, I wish I could change what I said. Or do something differently.”

“We’ve talked about this many times,” Kit reminded him. “There’s nothing for you to feel guilty about. No one forced me to climb in the rigging. I made that choice. And my fall was a freak accident. So stop blaming yourself.”

“But you were just a boy—”

“Stop,” Kit insisted.

John continued as if Kit hadn't spoken. "And now I have you involved in my smuggling business. If you slip this time, Kit, your fall will be a lot longer. And harder."

"Your involving me in your smuggling business has given me reason to hope."

His uncle sighed, the sound one of surrender. "Often I question the wisdom of involving you, but then I have dinner at my brother's table, and I know I'm doing the right thing. I hope you're able to buy that ship soon, Kit."

Struck by inspiration, Kit leaned forward. "When are you sailing next?"

"In two weeks' time. Why?"

"Take me with you, Uncle John. Teach me how to sail a ship. I'd much rather learn from you than my father." Kit stood and began to walk restlessly around the drawing room. "I can't stand being cooped up in an office all day. I want to be on the open seas...I want to experience the freedom of sailing from one port to the next..."

"Kit, you know how important you are to me. I would if I could. But I don't want to anger Edmund." A contemplative expression on his face, John puffed on his cigar. "He may be my brother, but he's also running the company, and he holds the purse strings. He'd cut me off the moment he thought I'd deliberately undermined his plans for you."

"But Uncle John, I'm dying in that warehouse," Kit pleaded, his voice cracking. "I can't stand it a moment longer."

"I know 'tis hard. But soon...soon, you'll become accustomed to your life and you'll stop feeling so trapped. Perhaps you'll even embrace it."

"Never," Kit swore.

"Or maybe you'll save enough money, buy your own ship, and sail off into the sunset," John continued, as if Kit hadn't spoken. "Who knows? But for now...you'll just have to tolerate it."

"It's very easy for you to say this. You're not the one hunched over the company ledgers."

"My life isn't easy either, Kit. Maybe the idea of sailing up and down the coastline sounds romantic to you, but it can be damned difficult, especially when a storm kicks up and lightning is striking the mainmast and you're wondering if you're going to see the sunrise. At least in an office, you won't be in danger of falling from the rigging, and God knows you'll live a more than comfortable life, with all of your father's money behind you."

"But that's not what I want."

"We all have to make sacrifices in this world. 'Tis part of life."

Kit felt his good spirits sinking down into his toes. His idea had been a brilliant one, and his uncle had shot him down so casually. A feeling of helplessness made his stomach turn.

John suddenly stood up and picked up his satchel. He rooted around in its depths with a curious intensity, as if he were searching for a prize possession. "I brought something from the West Indies to show you. You're a smart fellow, you've read a lot of books. What is it, d'ya think?"

Kit stared as his uncle pulled a strange object out of the satchel. A round orb, seemingly made of glass or some other clear material, sat in his hand. About the size of a billiard ball, it had a reddish-black substance slowly rotating around inside it. The fluid also appeared to be shot with gold threads that sparkled in the lamplight.

John held the orb closer to a lamp. "Have a close look."

Kit squinted at it and watched the liquid swirl in a way that seemed to steal the thoughts from his head, leaving him blank-minded. A sensation of awe gripped him, along with an instinct that something about it wasn't quite...*right*. "What in blazes is it?"

"I don't know. I found it in a cave in the West Indies, next to the cave where I usually pick up barrels of rum."

Kit widened his eyes as he stared at the globe. He couldn't seem to tear his focus away. "I can't even guess what it is."

John's palm curled possessively around it. "Neither can I."

"How did you find it? And when?"

"We laid anchor outside of the cave around midnight and picked up the barrels of rum. The entire time, I felt this strange...well, I'm not sure how to describe it. 'Twas like a pulling sensation. And I grew stronger as I rowed toward its cave."

Kit lifted his fingers to brush them against the orb, but John quickly moved it out of the way. "Don't touch it, Kit. 'Tis cold. Ice cold."

Kit felt his gaze becoming unfocused. "It's stealing my thoughts."

"'Tis doing more than that. It gets into your head, and makes you think strange things. I've even heard it speak to me, though I can't understand what it's saying. It's like a sea siren, drawing me to it against my will. But the damndest part about it—"

John brought the orb closer to his face, until he was staring directly into its swirling depths. "The damndest part about it is how good it's been making me feel. When I touch it, it's better than having a woman. A hundred times better."

His uncle's fawning tone, which was so unlike him, was enough to snap Kit out of his reverie. He frowned. "Give the orb to me. I'll keep it safe and investigate it a little more. Of course I'll let you know immediately when I discover something."

John clutched the orb to his chest, in the manner of a man protecting his beloved. "You can't have it. It's mine. I won't share it."

Kit raised a placating hand. Inside, however, his heart was pounding. Something was very, very wrong. “Of course. I’ll simply investigate, then, and report back to you on whatever I find. But what are you going to do with it? Keep it by your side?”

“I’m going back to the West Indies, back to the cave where I found it. There’s something else in that cave. I know it’s there. I hear it in my head. It wants me to return. To rescue it. It has something it wants me to do.”

“I recommend against this course of action, Uncle,” Kit said, swallowing.

“Why? Do you want it for yourself?”

“No, of course not. You’re not thinking rationally.”

“And you’re sounding more like your father every day.”

Kit’s shoulders slumped at John’s unexpected cruelty. Quickly, though, he shook himself and fixed a narrowed gaze on the swirling fluid inside the orb. “How is the fluid swirling inside the glass like that? It seems to defy the most basic laws of nature.”

“I think it’s alive, somehow,” John admitted in hushed tones.

Kit felt himself go cold. “*Alive?*”

“Aye. ’Tis alive.” John slipped the orb into a pocket inside his coat, drained the remaining whiskey in his tumbler, and stood up. “It’s nigh onto midnight, nephew. I have to go over to the warehouse and remove my cargo. You’ll doctor the books as we’ve agreed, to hide the loss of the barrels I’m going to take?”

“As we’ve agreed.”

“Good. This next run should be even more profitable—I’ll be bringing back a hold full of bananas, as well as coffee and sugar. See you in a few weeks, Kit.”

He wanted to put a hand on his uncle’s arm, to stop him from leaving, to insist he give up that strange orb. But he knew that John wouldn’t listen to him. “Goodbye, Uncle. I’ll let you know if I discover anything about your strange orb.”

John nodded, gathered up his satchel, and left the drawing room on unsteady legs. Kit watched him go, then stared into the fire, with fear tracing a cold, icy finger down his spine.