

A
CURSE
OF
SALT

SARAH
STREET



One evening, all but maddened by the nothingness, I opened my door. The hallway sang with a cold draft, scattering goosebumps over my skin. I stepped out, my feet meeting the cool floorboards, and I welcomed the discomfort.

Shadows spilled from the door leading to the deck at the far end of the corridor. A mounting darkness wrapped around me as I wandered, wraith-like, towards it. The lamps winked at me as I passed. It wasn't yet nightfall, but the light that reached me through the crack beneath the door was muffled, as if the sun itself had to fight to withstand what lay beyond. The Heartless King was out there, I knew.

My instincts told me to bolt myself back in my room and stay there another week, a month, however long it took, but my feet disobeyed. It had already been too long since I'd laid eyes on another human, even if he was barely that. I didn't want to speak to him, nor even alert him to my presence, but I couldn't help my curiosity. Each step grew easier and, by the time I reached the door, I'd almost forgotten to fear what awaited me on the other side. Almost.

I cracked the door open, leaving a gap just wide enough to peer out. The waning sunlight bathed the deck in gold and my eyes alighted immediately upon the hulking silhouette on the other side of the ship, shadows splayed out around him.

The Heartless King's power jolted through me like a bolt of black lightning. He stood at the starboard rail, his back turned as he stared out at the waves. That hood was pulled up over his broad shoulders and I couldn't help but wonder once more what it hid.

Keep out of my sight, he'd said.

I couldn't stop myself. I crept out on deck, letting the King's presence envelop me as the door snapped shut in my wake.

Shivers raced through my body, the icy wood biting my toes. Everything in me told me to run, to cling to what little safety I had left, yet something drew me on. Maybe it was that I hardly had any life to preserve, alone in that room, cowering from all the things I didn't know. Maybe it was that being afraid made me angry – made me hate him even more than I had every other day of my life. Calm seas and solitude were privileges the Heartless King didn't deserve. *What right does he have to hide?*

He didn't turn as I'd expected him to. That dark hood remained facing the water to the west. I watched him, curious. His silhouette was stamped against the sky, the colour of clouds before a storm. It was wrong, seeing such stark brutality haloed by the lilac gild of sunset. Such a thing shouldn't have been so pretty.

I watched him, perhaps a moment longer than I should've. Stars stirred in the descending haze of dusk, and I could've sworn they quaked when the King's voice broke through the silence.

'You aren't trying to sneak up and kill me, I hope.'

Try to kill him? What kind of fool did he take me for?

'I don't actually have a death wish,' I retorted. 'I'm only here because you threatened my father's life.'

'I had nothing to do with that.' His reply was abrupt, but he spoke again after a beat, voice rumbling right through me.

'Why did you come out here, then? I thought I told you to stay away from me.'

I hovered on the brink of another step closer. His question stumped me. I hadn't meant to approach him at all, to be risking everything for nothing. Yet there I stood, a meagre few paces from the Heartless King himself.

Not afraid, I reminded myself.

'I don't know,' I answered truthfully. What did it matter? 'Are you going to kill me?'

The King laughed, cold and dark as the coming night. 'Not tonight.'