



## Miki

This story is about the time I went out on the Ice Sea. It was the middle of November, I had just had my tenth birthday, and there were whales resting in our bay. Clouds of spume hung above their shining backs, and a thick mist, white and beautiful, had been blanketing the horizon for days.

In Blue Bay, where I live, winters can be so cold that the air freezes the sails of ships. I found a bird on the ground once, a cormorant that had dropped from the sky when its wings went rigid from cold. It wasn't dead. I carried it home to Dad, who has such a knack with animals that we were able to let the bird go after a couple of days.

Dad has a way with everything in the natural world. There's something on our kitchen wall—a thing most people don't have on their walls. A piece of a mermaid's flipper. Not very big, about the size of a mermaid's flipper. Not very big, about the size of the corner of a hankie, a little bit furry and slightly

pinkish. When Dad was younger, he caught the mermaid in his net when he was fishing for cod. She was so frightened that she screamed and her flippers whipped back and forth. She obviously thought he wasn't going to release her, but he did, of course.

"Because it's one thing to catch cod and quite another to catch a mermaid," he said. "There are some things we don't do!"

Once she'd calmed down he freed her gently from the net and let her go. But a small piece of flipper had been torn off and lay on the bottom of the boat. That's the piece he mounted on a board and nailed up on our kitchen wall. Miki and I glued pebbles around it.

Miki is my sister and she's the reason I ventured out on the Ice Sea. Because, you see, there are some people who believe there's no difference between catching a cod and catching a mermaid. Or doing even worse things. Where I live, there was a time when pirates roamed the seas. Foul, wicked pirates.

"Tell me about Whitehead," Miki used to say when we were lying on the pull-out sofa and it was time to go to sleep. Dad was in the bedroom snoring so hard the whole house seemed to shake.

"But you won't go to sleep if I do," I answered. "You'll stay awake half the night crying and you'll wake me up. We'll be useless in the morning."

"I promise!" she whispered close to my ear.



“I promise to go to sleep. Please tell me. Please, please, please, nice Siri!”

So I told her anyway. And, as always when I told Miki about Whitehead, I started like this.

“There’s a man who treats children as if they’re animals. And inside that man, in the place where other people have a soul, there’s a space as empty and cold as an ice cave.”

“He’s the coldest man there is,” Miki said. She always wanted to help out with the storytelling and, in fact, she knew the story as well as I did.

“That’s right, the coldest man you can possibly imagine,” I said. “He’s a pirate captain, you see, and his hair is as white as snow. It’s so long it reaches his waist, but he wears it up in a bun, the way ladies do.”

“Why?”

“Because he doesn’t want his hair to freeze and snap off. Anyone who joins Whitehead and serves as one of his pirates becomes rich. Unbelievably rich. Do you know why?”

“Because Whitehead lets his crew keep all the loot for themselves.”

“Yes. He lets his pirates share all the gold and silver, all the iron and furs, all the money chests and valuables among themselves. He doesn’t want anything. The only thing he wants...” I felt a shudder in my stomach as I always did when I reached this part of the story. “The only thing he wants is

children. Small, thin children, the smaller the better. Whenever the pirates get hold of small children they throw them straight into the ship's hold."

"What does the ship look like?"

"It's white, with three masts. On the prow, right at the front, there's a wooden raven's head with a gaping bill. The ship's called the *Snow Raven*."

"But nearly everyone just calls it the *Raven*."

"That's right. And in the *Raven* they sail all the way to Whitehead's island."

"Where's that?"

"Far to the west. As far as you can sail before tumbling over the edge of the world. You know there's a place called Seglen, don't you, Miki?"

"Yes." Miki's voice was hoarse.

"And you know what kind of place it is?"

"It's a village. A big village with paved streets. Pirates go there to drink and brawl and..."

"Well, I'm not exactly sure about the brawling. But I do know that Seglen is not a nice place and that a lot of rough people go there. All kinds of crooks. People who want to make money by stealing it from others. And by far the worst are the ones who come looking for Whitehead so they can work for him. Probably Whitehead's island is somewhere near Seglen."

"What happens to children who are taken to his island? What do they have to do there?"

“Whitehead has a mine,” I said. “A great chasm in the earth.”

“What kind of mine?” Miki said.

“No one knows. But they *say*...”

“They say it’s a diamond mine!”

“Exactly.”

“And there are masses of diamonds in the ground. Some as big as apples,” Miki said.

“That’s what they say, anyway. They also say he has a prison warden—a woman—who guards all the children. That woman...”

“That woman is Whitehead’s daughter and she’s had all her teeth taken out and diamonds put in instead.”

“That’s right. And Whitehead drinks his wine from a mug carved from a single diamond. You know how valuable diamonds are, don’t you, Miki?”

“Mm.”

“You could buy our whole island for a diamond no bigger than a pea.”

“But why...why does he need children to work there? Why can’t he have grown-ups?” she asked.

“No one really knows,” I answered. “But just imagine crawling round in the dark from morning till night. With a pick in your hand and your knees all bloody. Children aren’t likely to last long in the mine. Either their backs break from the loads they have to carry or the damp gives them lung disease.

Or the darkness drives them so mad that they... well, they just give up the ghost.”

Miki swallowed hard.

“It’s the worst thing...” she whispered.

“Yes,” I whispered back. “To be kidnapped by pirates and taken to that mine is the worst thing that can happen to a child.”

And that’s the point in the story where I’d stop telling Miki about Whitehead.

When we were lying in bed, all this seemed no more than a fairy tale. Or something that could only happen to other poor children. Of course, we were terrified of the pirates, but it never ever occurred to us that we might meet them ourselves one day. I would never have believed for a moment that Whitehead would sink his claws into my little sister.

