

To family and friends.

Adventures are best when shared.

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For further information, contact:

Tumblehome, Inc.

201 Newbury St, Suite 201

Boston, MA 02116

<http://tumblehomebooks.org/>

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Erb, Michael

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The Weather Detectives

A Kelvin McCloud mystery

Michael Erb

Chapter One

The Pier

Maybe those *sounds* were to blame.

Maybe that's why Henry felt like throwing up.

Stuffing his hands into his pockets, Henry Alabaster shifted his weight from foot to foot. Salty wind tugged at his sleeves. He looked at his surroundings, trying to distract himself by studying strangers on the pier.

A middle-aged couple.

A crying baby.

Unattended kids.

But no, he couldn't ignore those grating, lonely *sounds*.

Not twenty feet ahead, just off the side of the concrete pier, the source of Henry's worries towered from the water. A huge clipper ship, with colossal masts

stretching skyward, swayed in the morning breeze. As the ship tilted, its mooring lines strained with audible, fibrous tension. The ship's ramp, lowered against the concrete, inched back and forth with languid groans.

Somehow, it sounded like a warning to Henry—a message to stay away.

Henry shook his head. Stop being ridiculous, he told himself. These sounds could be heard at ports all around the world. They were perfectly normal—the song of ships at dock.

Plus, the big clipper *did* look impressive. No denying that. As sunlight broke through the morning clouds, the gold-painted woodwork on the deck gleamed. A single word adorned the ship's Persian blue hull: *Seafarer*.

Henry shuddered. Why did that word inspire such indistinct dread? The entire flight, sixteen hundred miles from New York to Tortola, hadn't dulled his foolhardy excitement, but seeing those giant letters made all the stories seem much more real.

Bizarre sightings out at sea. Mysterious accidents. Strange fog creeping out of empty rooms.

One account told of unexplained pounding on the ship's hull at night, when nothing but calm seas and cloudless skies surrounded the ship.

Other stories focused on the ship's captain, Vernon Holloway, who was described as a fierce and secretive man.

One rumor claimed that the captain was afflicted with a mysterious and terrible curse. The rumor claimed he would bring hardship and ruin to all who sailed under his command.

Henry imagined tomorrow's headlines:

Sinister accident aboard the Seafarer.

Or worse:

Ship vanishes without a trace; all aboard lost.

So why in the world was Henry standing here, a world away from home, waiting to get on?

A familiar voice rang out: "Magnificent! Don't you agree?"

Henry turned. His uncle strode down the concrete pier, two relish-covered hotdogs in hand. He handed one to Henry.

"It's an unconventional breakfast," said Henry's uncle, "but it'll do. Should have eaten at the hotel."

Despite everything swirling through Henry's gut, he couldn't suppress a small grin. His uncle, Kelvin McCloud, could be a little eccentric at times, but he was reliable at the very least, and rarely dull. Plus, company helps calm the nerves in uncertain times.

Henry took a bite of his messy hotdog breakfast. Kelvin's ill-fitting Hawaiian shirt flapped in the September breeze, a change from his drab detective attire. Good, Henry thought. Best not stand out. Henry looked like a tourist too, wearing shorts and a sunny yellow T-shirt.

In truth, they'd come here to investigate.

Henry stared up at the massive ship. At the front, eight arms of a wooden octopus supported the ship's sturdy oak bowsprit.

"It's impressive," Henry said, taking another bite of his hotdog breakfast. Relish hit his tongue with an overtartness, too strong for this early hour. Kelvin always

prepared for important things, but he was still learning the day-to-day details of being a guardian.

His breakfasts, for example, still needed work.

“Any sign of the Willowbys?” Kelvin asked.

Henry shook his head. “They’ll be here.”

The pier soon became more crowded. People shuffled past pulling fat suitcases straining at the seams with clothes, swimsuits, or whatever else vacationers typically brought on Caribbean trips. Some marveled at the towering wooden sides of the clipper, snapping pictures with silver digital cameras. Adults wandered the pier in blue summer dresses or red and white polos, but Henry saw some kids too.

Good. Henry was thirteen himself. Nearly fourteen, really. Someday he’d be expected to pay rent and file taxes and politely take the bill at restaurants, saying things like “No, no, it’s my treat,” and “Oh, you’re very welcome.”

But not today.

Today, he was going on a *voyage*.

Kelvin had let him take off a whole week from school for this trip, and he wanted to enjoy it.

But this wasn’t a vacation. Not really. Not after the letter that arrived in the mail, addressed to *Detective McCloud, Urgent*. And certainly not after the tales they’d heard of a cursed sea captain—a stormy, secretive man—that they’d come here to investigate.

Henry wasn’t a detective himself. Not officially, anyway, but his uncle wouldn’t solve half their cases without him, he suspected, so they were basically partners.

Back in New York, a sign hung outside their apartment door. An image of a magnifying glass was emblazoned over top of a thunderstorm, along with the words *Kelvin McCloud, Weather Detective*.

Someday they might replace it. Someday it might read *McCloud and Alabaster, Weather Detectives*.

Is that what Henry wanted? To join his uncle's business as a full-time partner? He couldn't say. Ever since moving to New York City to live with his uncle, he no longer felt sure about the future. He felt like something was missing.

Something profound.

Something *important*.

If only his parents were still around.

Nearby, a voice called out: "Florence! Hey Florence!"

Salty breeze swept Henry's blond hair. A bright-faced young man shouldered his way between people on the pier, calling ahead.

"Florence!"

Under a bright purple sun hat, a refined woman turned her eyes upward. A moonstone necklace glinted beneath elegant features.

The man grinned. "I don't believe it! Florence, I didn't take you as the cruise type. What on Earth are you doing here?"

Henry watched. The woman's blue eyes widened, but only for a moment. She waved a hand. "Oh, have we met? Look, whatever you're selling, I don't need it."

"But—" the man started.

Venom sparked in the woman's eyes. "That's *final*. I

know people like you, preying on tourists, never working a day in your life. You won't con me."

The woman strode away. The young man, thunderstruck, sulked off into the crowd.

Strange.

Henry lifted himself on his toes, trying to spot the woman again. Instead, he caught sight of three people farther down the pier. It was the three people he'd been waiting for.

Or, rather, the *one* person.

Beside an athletic woman and a full-bellied man, a girl with a red roller suitcase marched along. Her black hair curled beneath a snug blue hat and her brown eyes, even from a distance, sparked with life.

Rachel.

Tips of butterfly wings tickled in the inside of Henry's stomach.

It felt like ages since he last saw Rachel. In fact, it had only been a few months. They'd met on an investigation during the summer—the death of a wealthy banker in a hailstorm. They spent several mysterious days together in a rainy New Jersey town. He and Rachel forged a connection then. It felt like one of those important, formative experiences—the kind of things that stick with you. Henry and Rachel kept in touch afterward, but months had passed since then. Months of emails. Months of missing a friend.

A drip of yellow mustard slid down Henry's finger. The messy hotdog! That didn't look cool. He took a few big bites, but Rachel let her suitcase drop and ran the rest of the way, throwing her arms around him.

“Henry! How have you been?”

Henry coughed, his mouth full. Rachel clapped him on the shoulder.

“So that’s it, huh?” Rachel stared up at the massive clipper ship. “Think it’ll live up to its reputation?”

Henry managed to swallow. Rachel’s question needed no explanation. Memories of late nights pouring over news articles in New York flashed through his head. He’d read accounts of frightened passengers who talked of strange thumps in the night and mysterious warnings scratched into tattered sails. He’d read about the ship’s secretive skipper, the enigmatic Captain Holloway, who barked orders and refused to answer questions.

“The cursed captain,” the articles read.

The captain who brings hardship.

The captain who dooms his crew.

Henry tried to sound confident and casual. “I guess we’ll find out.” Still, electricity sparked through his veins.

Rachel rocked back and forth on her feet. The spring in her motions made it clear: she saw adventure here.

“Should be a fun week,” she said.

Without quite knowing why, Henry found himself laughing. Rachel beamed. Not far away, the ship continued to groan.

This is a bad idea, the ship seemed to say.

You should go home, it seemed to shudder.

But the twisting dread in Henry’s stomach had vanished. Why should he be afraid, anyway? Whatever dark mysteries unfolded aboard this ship, he and Rachel would face them together.

Michael Erb

After all, that cryptic letter in New York wanted
someone to investigate a mystery:

The case of the cursed clipper captain.

And that's exactly what they planned to do.