THE BOY WHO MET a WHALE





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nosy crow

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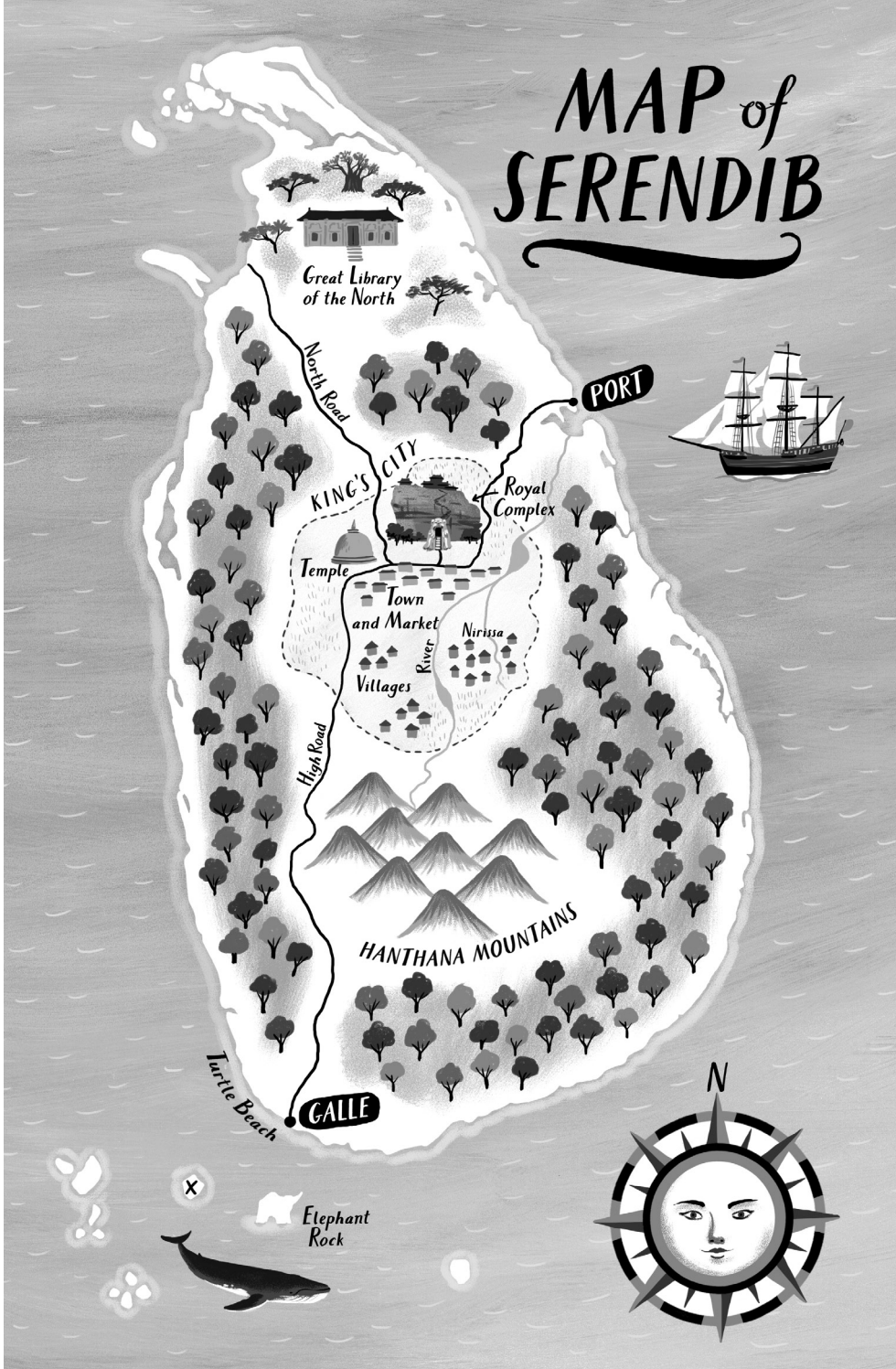


1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

To the Maalus of my life,
Who've been there for me
Not just in sunshine, but also in storm.






MAP of SERENDIB
Great Library of the North
North Road
PORT
KING'S CITY
Royal Complex
Temple
Town and Market
Nirissa
River
Villages
High Road
HANTHANA MOUNTAINS
Turtle Beach
GALLE
Elephant Rock
N





Chapter One

The boy clung to the rail with a death grip as the ship lurched violently in the storm.

It was sinking.

All around him was darkness and the roar and crash of waves as the ship buckled and rain lashed down. The wind was shrill and whip-sharp. But for all the noise, the ship was empty of people. Where was everyone? The boy ran along the deck, slipping and sliding to the wheelhouse.

It was deserted.

He sprinted down the length of the

ship, hurtling below deck to the captain's quarters. He pounded on the door, desperate to be heard over the sound of the thunder and the howling of the wind. But it was impossible.

The door opened suddenly and the first mate slipped out, a long leather pouch clutched in his hand. He started when he saw the boy, and quickly hid his hand behind him.

"Sir, the storm—" began the boy, but the man shoved him aside and hurried down the passage.

The boy held on to the side for balance and stumbled into the cabin. The captain was lying in his bunk, fast asleep. The room had been ransacked: drawers were hanging open and books had been tossed all over the place. The ship listed sharply and the debris on the floor slid to one side of the room where water was pooling, creeping darkly over fallen books.

The boy froze in shock. The crew had *known* they would be sailing into a storm. Why was the captain asleep so soundly? Why was the *whole ship* asleep? Apart from…

He stormed out of the captain's cabin and scrambled up to the deck. A lifeboat had been lowered into the sea, and the first mate was getting ready to climb down, accompanied by a man the boy recognised as the ship's cook.

He stared at the men, a cold fear clamping round his heart as the rain soaked through him. "Marco!" he screamed. "What did you do? Did you *drug* them?"

The first mate looked back and shrugged, not even bothering to deny it.

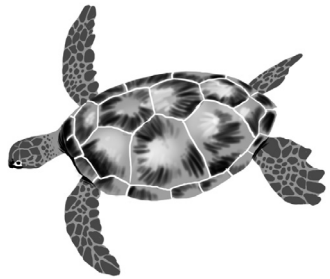
Rain pelted over the men as they prepared to get in the boat. Something snapped in the boy, and he raced towards them and plucked the leather pouch from the first mate's pocket.

Yelling, the men gave chase as the boy sprinted away down the ship. Lightning lit up his running figure. The ship groaned and shifted. The men stumbled and one fell as the boy doubled back, jumping over the fallen man and speeding past his furious companion. The first mate took out a knife that flashed silver in the gloom of the night. He ran fast, closing in on the boy as water filled the deck and crept up his ankles.

It was over. The ship was going down and it was too late to save anyone. The boy wailed in anguish as he threw himself over the side and into the lifeboat. The ship tilted and groaned, making a huge cracking sound as it broke apart. The men ran to the railing and yelled at the boy, but the rain blotted out everything

as he rowed swiftly away. The last he saw of the ship was it careening jerkily off course.

The boy screamed into the wind and wept for his lost friends.



Chapter Two

The baby turtle scuttled down the golden beach, wet and gritty with sand. Bit by bit scores of others emerged, their shiny black bodies, flailing limbs and beady eyes glinting in the early-morning sun. They scampered towards the water, their little legs scuffling over the freshly turned-up sand. A bale of tiny turtles – all eager to make their first meeting with the sea.

Razi laughed as he ran after them, careful not to step on any of the little creatures. The sight never failed to amaze him and lift his spirits. He'd seen it a

hundred times, coming early to this stretch of beach to watch the newly hatched turtles running into the sea at sunrise. There was a white one among them, an albino turtle, the pattern on its back etched out in shiny black lines. It was lagging behind and in danger of getting lost.

"Go on! Go, your friends are leaving!" called Razi. He knew not to touch it so hoped instead his voice would cheer it on. Sure enough, the white turtle perked up and scuttled after the others.

Overhead a yellow-beaked ibis wheeled past. Razi kept an eye on it in case it tried to attack the babies.

The sea was a greyish blue, deepening gradually to a brilliant turquoise with the rising sun shining on the waves. Coconut trees fringed the beach, their wiry trunks twisted like swaying cobras.

Standing on the shoreline, Razi watched in awe. A wave came in, drenching the baby turtles as they swarmed up to meet it. They hopped into the water, greeting it playfully. Razi held his breath. This part always worried him. The turtles looked so little and fragile. But the whole lot of them swam away happily, dots of black on the rolling blue waves surging into the great ocean.

He sat cross-legged on the sand and watched them bob away. They disappeared quickly, swimming away to their new lives. He knew that turtles always came back to the very same beach they were born in to lay their own eggs. So someday when Razi was an adult he could be back here and see the babies of one of these same turtles.

It was a lovely feeling. But it couldn't completely dislodge the sadness that dimmed Razi's world, no matter how much the sun shone and waves danced.

The sun rose higher and prickled his skin. Then he saw something bobbing in the water. Something dark.

Razi squinted into the horizon. The turtles were all gone, but this was too big to be one of them anyway.

Whatever it was, it was heading towards land.

The sea glittered a brilliant, sparkling blue now, and the dark object swirled closer and closer to the shore with every wave.

It was a boat.

Razi stood up. This wasn't a fishing boat like the ones on Serendib. This boat was plain and simple, with no sail or outrigger, and, as it sailed closer, Razi saw it had some strange lettering etched on the side.

Foreign letters, thought Razi excitedly. Where had

the boat come from?

It dipped into a wave and then lifted up, a solitary blot on the empty ocean. As it surged closer, Razi saw something droop out over the side. Something small and bunched.

A hand.

An actual human hand! Someone was in the boat!

Razi staggered back, jabbing his foot on a pointed shell. The pain hardly registered as he watched the boat bobbing closer. He looked around the beach wildly to see if there was anyone to help. But, as usual, it was entirely deserted.

The boat swirled closer and Razi froze. Was he going to have to get into the water? Dread clawed his heart at the prospect.

A gull squawked overhead, startling Razi. It was the jolt he needed and he ran into the sun-warmed water, soaking his clothes as he waded quickly towards the boat.

This is OK, you can do this, he told himself over and over as he tried to ignore the water rising to his chest.

Razi reached the boat and looked over the side. An egret swooped by and darted off again, leaving the echo of its cry.

Razi gulped.

Lying in the bottom of the boat, sunburnt and still, was a boy.