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One

Birds were gathering in ever-greater numbers to scream at him. He couldn't hear them any longer; the roaring inside his ears was too loud. His head was spinning as if he was about to pass out again.

'Dead down,' he murmured, as if speaking to someone. There was no one. He had lost his two best friends. 'That's sick, that is. Dirty down and sick.'

Derri's bare feet were bleeding. He was very dark, but the blood was being taken from his face, away from the skin. He had hardly any energy left. The forest floor was littered with broken twigs and branches, thorns and the sharp husks of broken nuts. More and more forest debris rained down onto Derri's head and shoulders from the outraged birds in the canopy. His feet were badly cut, but that alone was not what was taking his blood. Something else was with Derri, something he couldn't see or even feel, beyond an impression of being ridden, of extra weight and tightness in his back.

All he had on was a pair of old torn shorts. He was probably about sixteen years old, roughly the same age as all the surfers in the seaside camp he loved and so wanted to get back to. His legs and feet were working as if by themselves, without effort on his part, but without strength. The stranger's legs on the forest floor down there buckled and gave way and Derri went over again.

He had to lie face down, breathing in the dank fungi stench of the ground. At least it was cool for a while. But the birds above

gathered in number and fierceness the longer he stayed in one place, and the reptiles hissed at him and the insects clicked too close.

'You're wrong,' he said. His words were lost in the ground. He had to keep going. If not – there was no 'if not'! If he stayed here any longer, he'd never make it back to the ASP surf camp and the other seaside dwellers.

He started to recite the five Camp Commandments, as he had when he was much smaller, learning them by rote. '*Honour Your Father and Your Mother*,' he said. The familiar words reminded him of home, his friends, who felt like his only family, and the sound and smell and the cool feel of the sea.

'*You shall do no Murder*,' he said, heaving himself up. His back felt so tight, so heavy. His head almost took off from his shoulders as he stood. He went so dizzy he staggered sideways. The insects clicked in his ears. The birds above cackled with amusement. He tried to look up. He wanted to shout at these creatures that he wasn't afraid.

'*You shall not steal*,' he muttered. '*You shall not – shall not Covet your Neighbour's house!*' he tried to shout. 'I'm not – not scared. Not 'fraid!'

But he was afraid, more than anything, of ending up here in the forest like the other two, his best friends covered with insects, coming to bits, becoming so quickly food for animals and vicious plants.

Derri recited the fifth commandment, scratched onto the signs much later: '*Surf's always up – Honour the best rider like Your Father and Your Mother.*'

'Surf's always up,' Derri repeated. All he wanted was to see the sea again, just once. There was nothing in the whole world like the sea. It was his home. He had to get back there, to the shore, to the camp. Out of the forest.

'Whatever,' he said. 'Whatever it takes. Whatever.'

Two

They would have found him, sooner or later, but the clatter of the birds and the hiss of snakes and lizards told them straight away and showed almost exactly where he was.

'It's them!' Ash said.

They had been looking out for Derri and the other two for three whole days, as far as anyone could see beyond the periphery wires of the ASP camp. The forest canopy came in close and had to be hacked back every other day. The camp was a collection of bare wooden huts enclosed not only by wire, but dense forest and sand dunes on three sides, with the sea lapping at the fourth.

'They're back!' Ash called. She started running for the wire, where the birds were most active and agitated.

Laura tried hard to keep up with Ash, but was left far behind as always. Jon heard her and came running out, dragging Rich with him.

There was a sign fixed to the wire where the birds gathered. It was rusting, with a hole in one corner. On the outwards side, it read, 'Admittance Strictly Prohibited' in bold red letters on a white enamelled background. Below the sign, Derri lay sprawling face down in the undergrowth.

Ash halted at the sight of the thing clinging to Derri's back. She reached out and tugged at the taut wire. 'Derri!' she called out.

'What's that?' Jon shouted out, coming up beside Ash. 'That's sick, that. Dead down!'

'It's Derri,' Ash said.

Rich came up beside Jon and looked as if he was about to throw up. 'Sick,' he said. 'Oh, no! What is it?'

'It's Derri,' Ash said again.

Then Laura was with them. 'Get the thing,' she said. 'Cut the wire.'

'Don't!' shouted Jon. 'Don't let it in!'

'It's Derri,' Rich said through pale lips. 'He's breathing.'

'Don't,' Jon growled. 'You don't wanna. Not so sick things. Don't let 'em in.'

'Cut the wire,' said Laura. 'Ash, cut the wire.'

Jon would have stopped her if he could, standing to one side there with that disgusted and aggressive look on his face, with Rich by his side, simply disgusted.

'Don't be 'fraid,' said Ash. She had the thing with the crimpers and wire cutters.

'Not 'fraid!' Jon cried upwards, trying to appear bigger than he was. 'Who's 'fraid?'

Ash snipped the wires and the ASP sign fell to the sandy soil. 'With me,' she said to Jon and Rich; but they did not move as Ash, the champion rider of the surf, stepped through the gap. Laura alone followed. Together they stood over Derri, listening to his laboured breath but watching the appalling slow squirm of the huge black-brown creature clinging like a growth to the centre of his back.

'It's eating him,' Laura said, quietly.

'With me,' Ash turned and said to Jon and Rich, but still they never moved. 'With me!' she called out to the rest of the camp, knowing what effect this would have on Jon. 'Here! With me! Anyone! Over here! It's Derri!'

Jon puffed up and stepped through the wire suddenly, still dragging Rich with him, before anybody else could get there. 'Get him up,' he was saying, heroically, as the others started to arrive. He and Rich and Ash dragged Derri from the ground. Laura watched; with her thin, spindly wrists and arms, she'd have only got in the way.

'You,' Jon said, to some of the others gathered about the gap in the wire, 'get the legs – not you girls!' he tried to order.

Ash looked at the boys. They stayed where they were.

'Easy!' Jon said to the girls as they hauled Derri up almost higher than Jon could reach. 'Right. Go.'

Derri's head fell back as they carried him through the broken periphery fencing. His eyes were open. In a daze he looked out under fluttering lids at the open sky. 'The sea,' he said. His lips were bloody and cracked. 'The sea.'

'What happened to the other two?' Ash said, touching his hot forehead. 'Derri, where're the others?'

'Eaten,' he said. 'The forest. Eaten. The forest! The forest!' He passed out again.

Three

Jon and Rich went out of the hut as soon as they had dumped Derri face-down on his bed. 'Not having that near me,' Jon was saying as he stamped out of the door. Alex and Nicholas, twins, the camp's only close relations, shared this hut with Derri. Like most of the other camp dwellers, they were waiting outside.

'Wrong,' Rich was mumbling, creeping out behind his best friend. But before he left, he turned at the door and gave Ash a glance of pure apology.

'Crets,' Laura said. 'Craps!'

Ash was inspecting the massive slug-like creature stuck between Derri's shoulder blades. There was a knock on the door of the hut. Nobody knocked on doors. It just wasn't done. All they ever did was shout 'with you' before coming in.

'With you?' Jess's voice peeped through the doorway before she did.

'With us,' said Ash.

Jess crept in and stood away with her hand covering her mouth. 'Will,' she mumbled. She turned away. 'Will! With me! Will!'

When Will came loping in to be with her, as he almost always was, Jon and Rich traipsed back in behind him and stood skulking in the far shadows. Will inserted his huge presence between Jess and the dark dangerous blob on Derri's back. 'That don't go,' he said. 'Sick, that is.'

'Someone gotta do something,' Laura said. 'Someone.' She looked up at Ash. They exchanged glances.

'Shouldn't have let him back in,' Jon was saying loudly, as if to Rich, but really to everyone. 'Shouldn't have done it.'

'Could be anything,' Rich ventured. 'Could get any of us.'

Laura looked at Ash again. Ash shuffled. Nobody said anything.

Jess held onto Will as he looked down onto Derri's back from his great height. Jess looked up at him. Rich would have held onto Jon if he could have got away with it. Nobody would have minded. Only Jon. Jon minded everything.

'What shall we do?' Laura asked Ash.

Ash watched Jon glance at Will. Neither of them was going to volunteer. Jon wouldn't, if Will wasn't going to. They both looked willing to leave this one to the Camp Champion. Ash looked more closely at the giant slug-like leech. From the tapered shape of it, the thicker end seemed to be the head. Every now and then the leech moved slightly, as if breathing in. It wasn't breathing in – it was inflating, filling with blood. Derri's blood.

'Don't touch it,' Laura whispered into Ash's ear. 'Please don't. Don't know what it'll do.'

'Got to,' Ash said, approaching the thing with her fingers. At that moment, whether it sensed it was about to be touched or by coincidence, the massive greedy lump gave a jelly-shudder, a wobbly revolting jerk. Ash's hand came away as Jess gave a little squeal.

'Don't,' Laura whispered. She was tiny, thin, with massive, frightened eyes.

Ash glanced at Laura, at her best friend's large eyes, then at Jess's perfect face peeping from Will's shoulder, and finally at Jon and Rich floating in the gloom in the far corner of the hut. 'Got to,' Ash said again, preparing her hand for contact with the blood-bag of a leech. 'Has to come off,' she said, watching with horror as her own fingers approached the thing's bloated body.

She was revolted to feel how packed tight and warm it was. It was huge, covering way over half of Derri's back now.

Ash had to run her hand over it. It looked slimy, but wasn't. It was mottled but shiny, like a snakeskin, softer than that though, more rubbery. She placed her other hand over it. Ash tried to push her fingers between the leech and Derri's skin. She felt the

thing hunker down, sucking harder to stay in place, like a sea shellfish against a rock. The harder Ash pushed against it, the harder it held on.

'Hates us,' she said, as she could feel the greedy malevolence in its perverse strength, its determination to hang on until the job it was doing was finally done. Even then, she felt with a shudder of nausea, the thing would probably never let go. Even then there would be more and more juices for it to suck.

'Hates us,' Laura repeated.

'Hate it!' said Jess from Will's shoulder.

'With you there,' said Will.

Jon and Rich stayed where they were, watching from the shadows as Ash's fingers pushed hard between the body of the creature and Derri's back. Every move she made, the jelly solidified against her hand.

'Vile jelly,' she grimaced, tugging at the leech. 'Out. Out!' Ash pulled as hard as she could. The leech hunkered harder. 'The tail,' she said. 'Get the tail.'

'Where's it?' said Will.

'No,' said Jess, holding harder on to him.

'The end, down there,' Ash said through gritted teeth. The thing was tightening ever harder over her fingers, cutting off Ash's blood supply. No wonder this thing was killing Derri. 'Will,' she said. 'Help.'

'Will,' Jess said, in warning.

But Will eased Jess away and came to Ash's side. As he did, Ash noticed Jon approaching, trying harder to gather enough courage to beat Will to it, but the look on Jon's face told Ash he was going to let Will have this one without a fight, for a change.

'Lift it from there,' Ash said, nodding towards the thinner tail of the thing. She herself was stuck, both her hands fixed in place by the fingers. 'Pull it,' she said. 'When I say. Ready?'

Rich appeared, stepping up sheepishly by Jon's side.

'Ready,' said Will.

Rich looked away.

Ash took a deep breath. 'Pull!' she shrieked, dragging upwards as Will ripped up the tail. The leech-thing came away with a slurping plop and a tear and a splash of blood that arched

through the air. The creature thumped against something before dropping heavily to the floor, where it shook with a sickening sucking sound that turned everyone's stomach.

They all stood and looked down in horror, then at the huge red sucker-mark it had left on Derri's back. Then they all looked at Rich. The leech had flown through the air and splattered against his chest as the arc of Derri's blood flew and striped him from shoulder to hip.

Rich looked down at himself, at the blood, before looking at everyone looking at him. His eyes went up to the ceiling then disappeared into his head as he went over, fainting clean away and falling to the floor, quivering like the blood-creature he was lying next to.

Four

Ash and Laura were sitting outside in the shade waiting for their turn. A night and most of the day had passed since Will had volunteered to take the leech and throw it as far as he could over the wire and into the forest.

'Kill it,' said Jon.

The thing was still alive. Its gruesome mouth pouted and sucked at the air.

'You kill it,' said Will.

'Don't mind,' Jon said, puffing up. 'Me an' Rich. With me, Rich?'

'With you,' said Rich, looking quite sick enough to faint again.

'*You Shall do no Murder*,' Ash quoted from the sign fixed in every hut. She had always interpreted that as killing nothing, eating nothing but the fruit and nuts from their trees. '*You Shall do no Murder*.'

'Not murder,' Jon said. 'Not with that thing.'

But in the end Will took it and threw it away over the wire. Since then, between them all, the teen surfers were keeping a continuous vigil by Derri's bedside.

The sun was high and hot. Every day it was the same, except when the storms came. Laura sat tucked into the dense leaves of a bush while Ash squatted further out in the dappled shade, intensely wiping down her surfboard. 'Shouldn't have,' she was saying, for the hundredth time. 'Should have stopped it. Shouldn't have let 'em go. No, Laura. My fault.'

Laura was shaking her head. 'Why?'

'You know why. *Honour the best surfer like Your Father and Your Mother?* You know what the sign says. You wrote it.'

'Didn't,' Laura said, for the thousandth time. Most of the dwellers believed she scratched the fifth commandment on to establish her best friend as leader of the camp. Laura always denied it. The commandment stood, anyway. Surfing was everything now.

'Doesn't matter,' Laura said. 'They were going anyway. You can't stop 'em.'

Ash had been angry with herself ever since she'd allowed the girl and the two boys to set out. 'It's not right,' she said. 'They shouldn't go.'

'No stopping it,' said Laura. 'It happened before,' she said. They were thinking of the unplanned expedition outwards, the other frightened boy who broke out looking for his mother and perished screaming in the woods within earshot of the camp, and the girl who tried in vain to rescue him. 'It'll happen again. One day.'

Ash shook her head. 'No. It won't. They don't come back. Only Derri, ever,' she was saying, as Will and Jess came out of Derri's hut blinking in the blazing sunlight. 'With him,' Ash said, getting up. 'How's it?'

'Any good?' Laura asked, hopefully.

'Not good,' Jess shook her head.

'Down. Dead down,' said Will, walking away. He didn't want to speak about it. None of the dwellers did. So nobody spoke. Sometimes they would grunt or growl, snarl or sneer. It was a common form of communication between them all, this kind of growl-grunt that depended on body language and facial expressions, or signing, like Tori and some of her friends did, to get the message across. It was very effective, because the dwellers were very good at it. Will hissed as he walked away, expressing the disgust and anger Ash and Laura could see in the solid set of his shoulders.

'Poor Derri,' Jess whispered, before turning and following Will.

Ash and Laura glanced at each other. They stepped out of the

shadow of the bushes together into the full sunlight. The heat not only bore down on them from the sun above, it came up at them, reflected from the pale yellow of the sand outside the hut Derri had shared with Alex and Nicholas. They, inseparable twins, had slept beside a fire on the beach last night, rather than return to where the delirious sick lay mumbling in the bed by the dark stained floorboards.

Inside that red-flecked hut, it was at least cooler. Derri, however, was burning up. 'Me to go,' said Laura, marching out to collect fresh water from the giant daffodrill flowers.

Ash tried to get Derri to drink. She wetted his lips with warm water. His breath smelled sour, like acid. The suck-mark on his back where the leech had clung had turned into a kind of scab, raw and raised and angry. At one end of the mark, where the head of the thing had been fixed, a black wound pouted, something like the damage a bullet might have made coming out. Beneath the skin, going away from the puncture, it was possible to follow a huge dark alien vein squirming down Derri's body, disappearing into his insides.

'Derri,' Ash said softly. 'Come on, Derri. Please. Please. Make it.' She heard Laura coming back into the hut. Cooler, fresher water appeared in a plastic pail beside the bed. Ash dipped a cloth and wetted Derri's lips again.

'Poor Derri,' Laura said.

Ash wiped his face. As she did, it seemed as if she were wiping his eyes open. The cloth passed across his brow and Ash and Laura stepped back in alarm as Derri's wild eyes fixed upon them. He was still chest down on the bed, with his chin on the pillow, looking up through red-rimmed eyes from under his dripping brow.

They both stepped back, then instantly regretted it. 'Derri,' Ash said first, stepping forward again. 'Derri.'

He looked as if he was trying to speak but his tongue was stuck. Ash helped him release it with the wet cloth. He coughed and retched, falling forward onto his sopping pillow.

Ash and Laura turned his head to one side. His eyes were closed again. The air rattled hard out of his chest.

'Awake?' Ash whispered close to his ear. 'Derri?' His eyes

fluttered, opening and closing, before settling on a heavy halfway position.

'Awake?' Ash asked. 'Hear me?'

'With you,' he said. It didn't sound at all like Derri speaking. His voice was too low and too rough, coming from somewhere seemingly much further inside him than his throat and mouth. The whole hut smelled of the deep down air that carried Derri's voice.

'Drink,' Ash said, holding some cool water to his lips.

Derri gagged. He couldn't swallow. 'No good,' came his hoarse whisper. 'No good no more – listen! Listen!'

'What is it?' Ash said.

'Is it . . .' he breathed. 'Is it the sea?'

'It's the sea,' Ash whispered close to his face; closer, she knew, than any other camp dweller would ever now get. 'It's the sea, Derri. It is the sea.'

He let out a massive sigh. 'That's all then,' he said, with a smile flitting for a moment across his face. 'That's it.' The smile instantly gave way to a grimace of pain.

'It?' whispered Ash. 'What's out there? Why so bad?'

Laura came in closer. 'Is he—'

'The sea,' Derri breathed.

'Derri?' Ash asked. 'Derri, what happened?'

Derri coughed, and Laura drew away.

'Everything,' he sighed. 'It all eats. Everything murders.'

'It eats?'

'We're eaten away out there,' Derri coughed. His eyes came open with a start. Laura stepped further away. 'They – everything murders! The forest – plants, animals. They eat us, chew us – to bits! That's all! That's why we're here – we don't have – anywhere else!'

He lay his head back down, sideways on the pillow. He was looking at Ash, looking hard at her. 'Nowhere,' he sighed.

Ash touched his face. Derri's sigh went on and on. Then it stopped. His eye never responded. Ever. Gently she closed his eyelids. They never came open again.