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Shark Island

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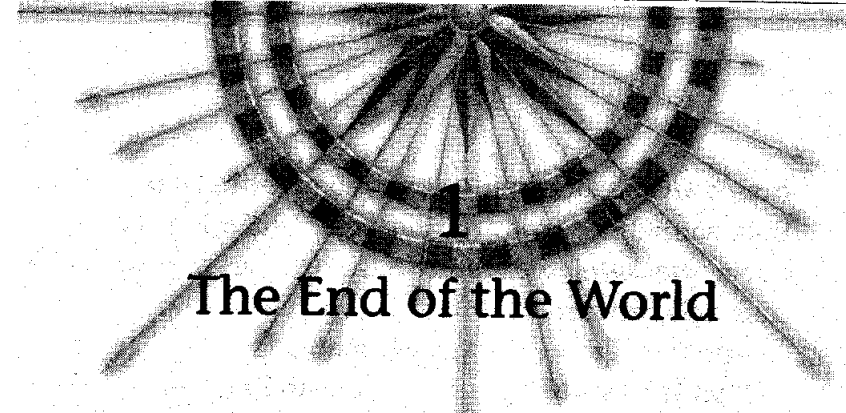

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The End of the World

Their whispering woke Hanna. It sounded like the hissing of snakes in the blackness. Mum and Dad were over near the window, the outlines of their heads just visible in the silvery reflected light from the waters of the lagoon. Mum had a sarong wrapped round her. Dad, as usual at night, had no clothes on. 'Has the boat stopped?' she heard Mum ask.

'I think so. I can't be sure. Just listen!'

There was a tense, tight silence. Hanna felt a sudden, unexpected prickle of fear. She eased up the corner of her mosquito net, strained her ears to hear.

At first there seemed to be nothing out of the ordinary—just the usual island noises: the rasping of cicadas from the jungle behind the hut; the soft lap-lap of wavelets on the beach.

But then she heard the engine.

It was coming from away to the right, from the deep water out beyond Dead Man's Leap: the low *bonka bonka bonka* of a powerful diesel. It had to be

from a *kumpit*, one of the big wooden fishing boats they sometimes saw cruising past, searching for horse mackerel and barracuda in the narrow channels between the reefs.

'Are they fishing?' Mum whispered.

Dad leaned further out of the window, squinting between the rows of palm trunks. 'I don't think so. There'd be lights if they were fishing.'

'Maybe they're after turtles.'

'Turtles don't nest on this side of the island, you know that.'

'Then what . . . ?'

A new noise: the high-pitched whine of an outboard motor starting up. Dad stayed at the window for a second or two longer, straining to see, then pulled himself quickly inside. 'They're coming here,' he said urgently. 'They're coming right into the lagoon!'

The sound of the outboard got rapidly louder. Hanna could hear the slap-slap of the waves on the hull of a small boat. Dad was groping around in the corner of the hut, finding his shorts, pulling them on. Sweat glistened on his narrow, bearded face. Mum was at the window now, peering out. 'There are about five of them,' she counted. 'No, six.'

'Are they armed?'

'I can't tell. They've got scarves round their heads, sort of bandannas.'

She was silent for a moment. Then she said something that made Hanna's heart lurch with fear. 'Do you think they're pirates, Nick?'

Pirates!

Not Captain Hook. Not Captain Pugwash. Not Bluebeard or Blackbeard or whatever his name was. Mum was talking about *real* pirates, Hanna knew, modern-day pirates. The kind who robbed ships—even big tankers—killed the crews, threw their mutilated bodies overboard. The kind Dad had told her there'd be no problems from, not in a million years. Not on safe, friendly Kaitan Island.

Dad squinted outside again. 'I'm going to go and talk to them, Lin.'

'No!' Mum's terrified reply came out as a shout.

'Well I don't propose to wait until they invite themselves in. If they're just a bunch of fishermen, well and good. If not I can keep them occupied long enough for you three to get away into the jungle. Wake the kids.'

'But, Nick!'

'I'm awake,' Hanna said. 'I've been awake right from the start. I've heard everything.'

'That's all we need!' Dad exclaimed.

Hanna felt a sudden, stupid, surge of anger. 'I thought you said there was no danger from pirates!'

'I don't know who they are, OK? That's why I'm going to find out. Now wake Ned and for God's sake don't let him make any noise.'

Hanna glanced down at the dark shape of her brother, hunched on the thin mattress next to the rough planks of the hut wall. He'd slept through everything so far, which was totally typical—it took an earthquake to wake him, especially on school days. Ten years old, three years younger than she was, though it could have been a century. She clapped a hand over his mouth and thumped him in the ribs. He stirred, struggled, and made a noise like a strangled chicken. 'Quiet!' she hissed, only just managing to control her spiralling terror. 'We're in danger!'

Ned wrenched himself free. 'What danger?' he demanded loudly.

Dad dropped down beside him. 'Ned, this is serious. There's no time to answer questions right now. I want you to get up, put some shoes on—not your flip-flops but your trainers—and I want you to do exactly what Mum says, OK? No arguing, no answering back. It's really really important.'

Ned glanced at Mum, then up at Dad's face. Even he seemed to realize the seriousness of what was happening. 'OK, Dad,' he said quietly.

Dad grinned at him, put a hand through the mosquito net, and ruffled his spiky black hair.

Then he stood up, turned, and gathered Mum and Hanna into his arms. For an instant he held them tight to his chest, so tight Hanna could hear his heart beating, smell his special, comfortable Dad smell; then he was gone, slipping quickly out of the side door, and down the ladder into the darkness. 'Be careful,' Mum called out to him. When she turned back, Hanna saw that her face was stretched tight, like a dead woman's.

The boat was coming in fast—very fast—screaming in towards the beach. It sounded like an angry wasp zooming into the attack. If this was home, Hanna was thinking, as she struggled with her salt-stiffened trainers, if this was England, we could dial nine nine nine right now, get the police. There'd be helicopters with searchlights, trained marksmen. Here there was just Dad—Dad with his silly flappy shorts and his bare chest—against half a dozen men with bandannas and, no doubt, guns. She wanted to go to him, be with him. They couldn't just leave him! 'Mum,' she began . . .

But Mum shushed her to silence. She was holding out bottles of drinking water. 'Take these,' she ordered. 'And when I say go, go. Take the path by the well, then go as fast as you can into those bushes on the ridge. And for God's sake be quiet.'

'But we'll need torches,' Ned protested.

'No torches. The moon's quite bright. Switch on a light and they'll spot you straight away.'

Hanna glanced at her mother. She was still in her sarong, still barefooted. She looked so Chinese, so *foreign* suddenly, with her high cheekbones and big almond-shaped eyes. 'But you're not ready, Mum!'

'I'm OK.'

'No you're not. Dad said . . . '

A crunch as the bow of the craft rode up onto the coarse coral sand of the beach. The engine cut. A moment of stillness, then Dad's voice—hard and challenging: *'Nak apa?'* He was frightened of nobody, Dad. Or if he was he never showed it.

'What's he saying, Mum?' Ned demanded.

'He's asking them what they want.'

There was a gabble of shouts in reply, splashes as the men from the boat leapt overboard into the shallow water. Again Dad's booming voice. *'Nak apa?'*

Mum had gone rigid, as if she'd been frozen or something. 'I've got to go to Dad,' she said urgently. 'He's not handling this right. He doesn't know how to speak to these people.'

'But he knows Malay,' Ned protested.

'Not *polite* Malay. Not the right kind of Malay. They'll listen to me, I'm certain of it.'

'But what about us? Dad said you should come with us.'

'You're quite old enough to look after yourselves!' Mum suddenly sprang to life, pushing them roughly out of the hut, down the steps, onto the coconut-strewn grass. She pointed in the direction of the well. 'Now go!' she ordered. 'We'll come and find you when everything's safe.'

Ned gave a sob of terror. 'But I don't *want* to go, Mum. I want to stay here with you!'

Mum sucked in a sharp breath. 'Please, Ned,' she began, 'please don't make me . . . '

'Come on, for God's sake!' Hanna grabbed at her brother's hand, wrenched him away. 'We'll be all right, Mum,' she called back over her shoulder, 'don't worry about us. Go and help Dad!'

They began to run.

Ned was slow at first, reluctant, glancing back at Mum. But then he had to concentrate on the path as it twisted up between the tangled roots of the coconut trees. 'Don't stop,' Hanna kept urging him, shoving him in the back if he started to slow. 'Just keep going.'

It was darker under the trees, a lot darker, and it got harder to run as the path steepened. They passed the well with its sagging rattan screens, the ground around it still wet from the water-fight they'd had while they were bathing earlier. Ahead was the dense wall of undergrowth where the jungle began. Something—a palm rat

probably—scuttled across the path in front of them, rattling the dry leaves. There were scorpions in the leaves, Hanna knew, and lots of other nasty things that only came out at night. That was why their hut was built on stilts. That was why . . .

Loud noises from the beach. She grabbed at Ned's T-shirt, jerked him to a halt, twisted back.

It was impossible to see anything—there were too many trees in the way—but the sound carried, crystal clear. There was some kind of argument going on—raised voices, the scuffle of feet in the sand. She heard Dad's tiger growl, Mum's softer tones. Mum was pleading with the men, it sounded like, offering them something, but they seemed to be ignoring her. There was a sudden loud shout from Dad. What sounded like a series of violent blows landing. The splash of a body falling heavily into the water.

Then the scream came.

It was like no other scream Hanna had ever heard. A scream of rage, not fear—harsh, cracked, starting off deep and low, then doubling and redoubling into a brain-splitting, blood-curdling howl. The terrible noise torpedoed across the surface of the bay, bounced off the steep rocks of Dead Man's Leap, seeming to get louder, not softer, as it went.

And then . . . silence.

It was even worse than the scream, somehow, the silence. More shocking, more terrifying. It was as if the world had ended, as if every living thing had been wiped from the face of the planet. There were no voices, no shouts, any more—not even the splash of waves on the beach. Even the cicadas high up in the jungle trees seemed to have been frozen into stillness. For the first time in her life, Hanna quite literally felt her hair stand on end.

Ned's voice, Ned's little-boy voice: 'It was Mum, Hanna. That screaming was Mum.'

'Of course it wasn't! It was one of the pirates. Dad must have . . . '

'It *was* Mum! I know her voice! It *was*!'

Hanna turned back to her brother. He looked like one of those kids you see on the news—those street kids in Palestine or somewhere—staring at the camera with already-dead eyes in the moments before the bullets slam into them. 'I'm going to go and find her,' he said quietly.

'No you're not.'

'I am!'

He tried to push past her, but she was too quick for him. She grabbed him by the neck, wrestled him to the ground, threw herself on top of him.

They'd had fights before—lots of fights—and Ned had almost always won. But this time it was different. Dodging his thrashing legs, she pinned

him against the twisted roots of one of the forest trees, forcing his head back until he started to choke from lack of air. 'Mum said stay here, so we're going to stay here!' she hissed desperately. 'If we go down there they'll capture us too, and then there'll be nobody to get help, nobody who'll know what's happened. Mum and Dad are depending on us, do you understand that? *Do you?*'

Ned struggled for a little while longer, then suddenly went limp. 'It *was* Mum,' he said hopelessly.

'It wasn't. I heard it just as clear as you, and it wasn't. Now promise me you won't do anything else stupid. Promise me!'

Ned was crying now, sniffing back tears. 'All right,' he said eventually. 'I promise.'

Hanna released him, stood up slowly. Even though she'd told Ned she was certain about the scream, she wasn't really. She wasn't certain about anything any more—what to do, where to go. Was she being a coward, staying here, keeping Ned here? What if there was something they could do right now? What if they *could* rescue Mum and Dad?

She sniffed once, twice. There was a strange smell. It was like . . . like a barbecue. Were the pirates *cooking* something? Not caring about snakes or scorpions or anything else, she pushed

herself quickly through the undergrowth until she got to a place where she could see.

Smoke. A tall column of black smoke was twisting up into the pale, moonlit sky. As she watched there was a flicker of flame at its base. Then another.

They'd set fire to the hut!

For some reason—for some stupid reason—it was her iPod she thought about. She'd had it for her thirteenth birthday from Mum and Dad, and had tucked it under her pillow before she went to sleep. It was the best present she'd ever had—easily the best. And now it was going to get burnt up. Destroyed. It was so unfair, so *totally* unfair!

It seemed impossible for flames to spread so quickly. Within seconds the flimsy hut was a roaring inferno, sparks shooting skywards in a mad swirl. There was a noise like guns going off as the bamboo poles holding the roof cracked and split under the intense heat. Some of the coconut trees nearby had caught fire too, their massive fronds curling and twisting like clenched hands . . .

Now there *was* light—more than enough. It looked like daytime down on the beach, and for the first time Hanna could see their attackers. They were thin, wild-looking men in ragged shorts and singlets. They had *parangs* slung from their waists—long, vicious slashing knives like the

one Dad used for cutting bamboo and coconuts—and some of them were carrying bundles. They were moving quickly away from the burning hut, back across the sand to where their boat was drawn up.

But where were Mum and Dad? Surely they weren't in the hut? Surely the men hadn't forced them to go back inside before they'd set fire to it . . .

A sudden movement from the boat caught Hanna's eye. It wasn't empty, as she'd first thought. She strained desperately to see. In the bottom of it, just visible, curled up like caterpillars, were two dark shapes—human shapes. One of them was wriggling, the other was still. It was impossible to be sure, but the moving shape seemed to be wearing a sarong. It had to be them. It *had* to be!

'Hanna?' Ned's voice beside her, hesitant, uncertain.

'They're in that boat,' she said, not taking her eyes off it. 'Mum and Dad are in that boat.'

As they watched, the men reached it, shoved it swiftly out into the water; swung themselves aboard. The engine screamed into life.

The craft surged rapidly into the lagoon, curving out beyond the reef towards Dead Man's Leap and the waiting *kumpit*. To the children it felt as if

it was taking their whole life with it—everything warm and comfortable and loving.

To Hanna's surprise Ned's hand crept into hers—the first time he'd willingly held hands with her for years. 'What are we going to do now?' he asked.

She was quiet for a long time, watching until the boat was out of sight, until there was just the flicker of moonlight on the water, and the flicker of flames from the burning hut. Then she took a deep breath. 'Something,' she said in a new, hard voice she didn't know she had. 'We're going to do *something.*'