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Sea Wolf

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David Miller

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Missing!

'It's the biggest pearl in the world,' Ned said, his eyes flashing with excitement. 'It's the size of a man's brain and it's worth thousands of pounds—*millions* of pounds probably! Jik's granny, the old magic woman, told him about it before she died. It's called *the Moon Pearl* and we're going to find it!'

Ned's best friend Jik, the Sea Gypsy boy, gripped the steering paddle of the *dapang,* the little outrigger boat that was carrying them northwards across the sparkling Sulu Sea, and nodded enthusiastically. 'Then we sell it,' he declared. 'And get dam rich!'

'Dam *stinking* rich!' Ned emphasized.

Ned's sister Hanna, who was sitting next to the mast, stared open-mouthed at the two boys. *A giant pearl!* Why hadn't they said anything about it before?

'It's hidden on a island called *Babi Besar,* which means Big Pig Island,' Ned went on. 'To find it you have to stand in a special spot that only Jik knows

about and wait till the full moon rises. The pearl's buried where the first ray of moonlight touches the ground—isn't that right, Jik?'

Jik nodded again. 'Dead dam right!'

Hanna felt a thrill run through her. The boys were talking about treasure—*buried treasure*! It was like something out of a storybook! She tried to imagine what the biggest pearl in the world would look like. Silvery, like the moon, she supposed—which must be how it had got its name. 'So where exactly is this Big Pig Island?' she asked.

'Near to Palawan,' Jik told her.

'But that's miles away! It's in the Philippines!'

He shrugged. 'No dam problem.'

But it was a problem. A big dam problem. In the months since the children had last been together, Hanna had read everything she could lay her hands on about the Sulu Sea and the people who lived there. She knew that the border with the Philippines lay just a few miles off the Borneo coast, and that beyond it was bandit territory, where thieves and pirates ruled. If they crossed into Philippine waters, they'd be sitting ducks, at the mercy of anybody who cared to rob them—or worse. No pearl, however valuable, could possibly justify taking such a stupid risk!

Her excitement vanished as quickly as it had come. 'You've been planning this all along,' she

said to the boys furiously. 'You knew you wouldn't be allowed to cross the border. It's way too dangerous! That's why you didn't say anything to anybody before we set out on this trip. Turn this boat round now!'

'Don't be such a wimp!' Ned told her. 'Don't be such a *girl*!'

Hanna glared at her brother. It took a supreme effort to stop herself from hitting him. 'I hate you!' she yelled. 'I hate both of you!'

'The feeling's mutual,' Ned said.

Hanna felt tears prick at her eyes. This was supposed to be a trip to celebrate the three of them being back together again. They would camp on some islands close to the mainland for a few days and swim and sail and fish. They'd made a solemn promise to Mum—and Jik's dad, who was Panglima—Chief—of the entire Sea Gypsy community—that they wouldn't do anything stupid, or dangerous.

It was a promise that, right from the start, the boys had intended to break!

How she wished she had a phone so she could call somebody to force the little idiots to turn back. To think they were only three years younger than she was! It could have been ten!

She stared around her uneasily. For the first time since they'd started, they were out of sight of

land—up to now there'd always been the comforting bulk of the Borneo coast away to the southwest. Now they were truly alone, and it would soon be night. Had they already crossed the border without realizing it?

The wind, which had propelled them northwards all day, had swung round to the east and faded completely. The sail hung limp and useless. One thing was clear—there was no way they'd ever reach land before nightfall. That meant spending a night at sea, uncomfortably squashed in the bottom of the boat, with no way of cooking any food.

It was the pits, the absolute pits!

She took off her straw hat and mopped her brow. It was so hot! It was always hot in this part of the world, of course—they were only a few hundred miles from the equator—but this heat felt different somehow. It felt thick—*oily*—clinging to her skin, sucking the sweat from her pores. Even the sun seemed to have something wrong with it now. It was a strange copper colour, its light dull and heavy.

She glanced back at Jik. He was adjusting the sail, trying to get the boat moving again. He failed, and returned to his seat in the stern. The carefree expression he'd worn on his face all day had gone.

The calm before the storm.

The phrase sprang into her head unbidden. Was that what this weird, hot, windless period was? She'd been reading about storms in the Sulu Sea only the other day. They were very rare, she remembered the book saying, except for three months in the middle of the year—July, August, and September. That was when typhoons sometimes tracked south from their normal route across the South China Sea . . .

Typhoons were like hurricanes, she knew—only worse. Whole villages could be wiped out on exposed coasts. Even big ships sunk without trace.

It was August now.

Mid-August . . .

The *dapang* gave a sudden lurch. A wave had passed beneath it, the first wave of any size they'd met all day.

A second wave followed.

And a third.

Conscious of the beating of her heart, Hanna bent down and opened the locker below the mast. Wedged in behind rolled-up fishing nets and coils of rope, were three lifejackets. They were old and smelly, filled with what felt like hard lumps of wood. But they were better than nothing. She thrust two of them at the boys.

'Put them on,' she ordered.

'You must be joking . . . ' Ned began.

But to her surprise Jik didn't object. He slipped his over his head and fastened the straps. He was peering at the horizon. *'Hunus* come,' he said uncertainly.

'Hunus?' Hanna asked.

'Big dam wind.'

She followed Jik's gaze, as she secured her own jacket. To the north a dense bank of cloud had formed. It seemed to be resting on the surface of the sea. There was not even the faintest breeze. It was as if the whole world had come to a halt, and was holding its breath; waiting . . .

At last Ned seemed to understand the danger they were in. He scrambled into his lifejacket. 'It's spooky,' he said. 'I don't like it. We've got to get out of here!'

'And how exactly do we do that?'

He glanced up at the limp sail. With no wind, and no engine, they could go nowhere. His face fell. 'I'm sorry, Hanna,' he said quietly. 'We should have stayed back in the islands . . . '

'It's too late to be sorry!' she snapped.

She turned to help Jik. He was attaching a long piece of rope to the plastic bucket they used to store fish, securing it tightly round the rim. 'What's this for?' she asked, puzzled, as he tied the other end of the rope to the bow of the boat.

'Boji.' He told her. 'Anchor. When goddam wind start to blow.'

'But I don't understand how a plastic bucket . . . ' Ned began.

'Wait. See.' He hurled it overboard.

For a moment or two nothing happened. Then the rope jerked tight and the little *dapang* swung to face the oncoming waves. The bucket was trapping enough water inside it to hold them steady. It was a brilliant idea!

The sea had begun a strange, agitated dance. White-crested breakers seemed to come from every direction at once. Balancing with difficulty as the boat pitched and yawed, the children fought to take down the sail. With a bare mast it was just possible they could ride out the storm. Jik swiftly cut three more lengths of rope—lifelines in case any of them got washed overboard—and lashed them to the bamboo outriggers. Whatever happened to the boat, Hanna realized, as they tied their lines securely round their chests, the big hollow poles would always float. She caught Jik's eye to thank him. He may have helped get them into this mess, but he was showing a lot of common sense now.

As night fell, the swell rose higher and higher. Now it was so dark she could no longer make out the faces of the others. Ahead of them lightning

was flickering, and here and there, through ragged gaps in the cloud, a few stars were visible. It must have looked like this at the beginning of the world, she found herself thinking—and would do at the end. Ned was crouched next to her, all his earlier arrogance gone. She curled an arm round him. 'It'll be fine,' she started to say to him. 'I know it will—'

She never finished.

The storm didn't just break, it *exploded.*

Everything disappeared in an instant. It was as if a massive dam had burst and was sweeping everything before it. Hanna clung desperately to the mast as an avalanche of water—spray; rain; it was impossible to tell which—thundered down on top of her.

The tiny boat began to surf madly down into the vast valleys of water gouged out by the gale, before climbing again, higher and higher, to meet each wind-lashed crest. *Dear God, let this not be a typhoon,* she prayed as she fought to keep her grip. *Let this just be an ordinary storm that'll be gone as quickly as it came . . .*

But it was no ordinary storm.

As the wind rose to an unholy shriek, Hanna's hands were ripped from the mast and she was sent tumbling along the length of the boat. Sharp things—paddles, fishing rods, a rusty

anchor—gouged at her flesh. She was going overboard . . .

An arm locked on to hers.

It was Jik. He was wedged against the steering paddle, fighting to keep the boat level. She pushed herself up beside him, clutching at the paddle, adding her own weight, her own strength to his.

But where was Ned?

She squinted desperately through the lashing rain. It was impossible to see anything clearly, even when the lightning was at its brightest. She prayed that he was still safe, that he'd managed to cling on with a tighter grip than she had. Was that dark shape hunched under the outrigger poles him, or was it a bundle of ropes that had burst out of one of the lockers?

'Ned!' she screamed. *'Is that you, Ned!'*

But her words were swallowed by the wind. There was no way he would ever hear her.

Long minutes passed. It seemed impossible that the typhoon could get any worse—but it did. It threw itself at them like a ferocious beast. Water—countless tons of it—thundered down on top of them. The boat was already half full, floundering rather than floating. It got harder and harder to steer. They were relying totally on Jik's homemade anchor to keep them upright, Hanna realized. It

was just a cheap plastic bucket. How long could it stand up to forces like these?

Then the big wave came.

It wasn't so much a wave as a solid black wall of water. It was taller than a house—taller than the tallest building in the world, it seemed to her—as it raced towards them with the speed and sound of an express train. Jik wrenched the bow towards it, but it was pointless. Not even a large ship could survive a wave like this—let alone a tiny, flimsy sailing boat.

Hanna just had time to suck in a lungful of air before the *dapang* swerved sideways, and somersaulted high into the air.

For a second she was flying, but then the wave grabbed her and crushed her into itself, and she was whirling round and round in a mad tangle of spars, ropes, and sails.

Down she went, further and further down into the blackness—until it felt as if her ears would explode and her brain would burst. Then, just when she thought she would never rise again, she was dragged swiftly, painfully back to the surface. As her head broke free of the water, and she gasped in a draught of air, she realized what had happened.

Her lifeline had saved her!

Battling with the swirling surf, bleeding from

numerous cuts, she hauled desperately on the slender rope. It seemed so long! But at last, just as her strength was failing her, she felt the solid push of wood against her hands.

It was the outrigger.

She flung her arms over it, and hung there gasping with exhaustion and terror. More waves followed, vicious, hump-backed breakers that threatened to tear her loose again and send her tumbling back into the depths; but somehow she clung on.

Then—miraculously, wonderfully—she felt the press of a body against hers. A flash of lightning revealed Jik's face, his cheeks stretched tight with fear. He too had used his lifeline to pull himself to safety.

But where was Ned? Why hadn't he joined them?

Groping blindly in the blackness she found his line, still securely tied to the outrigger.

She began to haul it in. At first she thought he must be swimming towards her, because why else would it be so slack?

It was only when she reached its frayed, tattered end—reached the place where the terrible force of the wave had snapped it in two—that the desperate truth became clear.

He was gone.