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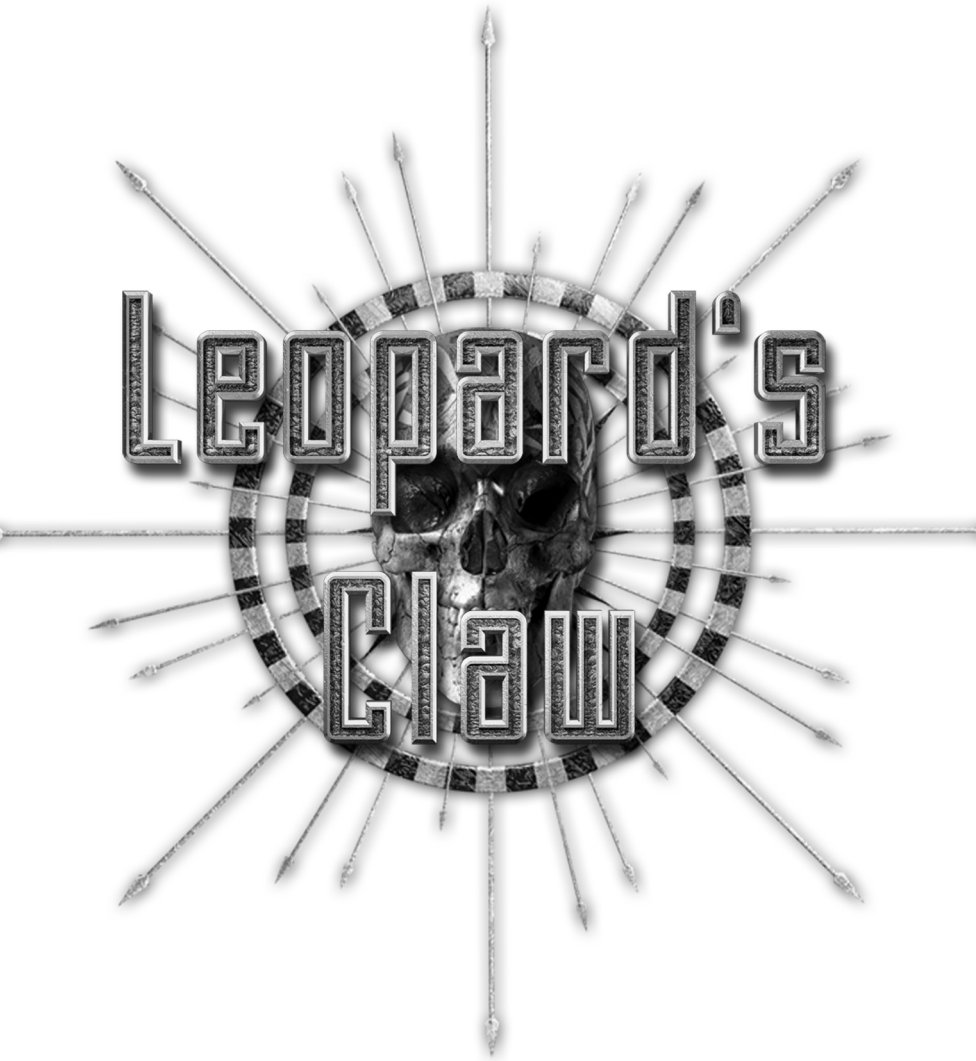
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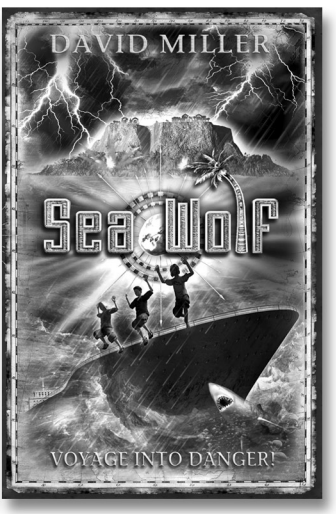

Leopard's Claw

DAVID MILLER

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1
Rough Justice

'Nicholas James Bailey, you have been found guilty of first degree murder. You will be executed by firing squad four weeks from this date, at a location yet to be decided . . . '

Dad flinched, as if every badly-pronounced word the judge read out was a bullet slamming into his body. His knees began to buckle. Only the prison guards holding on to him stopped him from collapsing entirely.

For a moment there was silence. Then the crowd in Court One of the Sangabera Justice Building erupted. People who, seconds earlier, had been sitting quietly, leapt to their feet as if under orders, and began to shout, waving their arms in the air. For an instant, Mum was lost in the crush. But then the children saw her launch herself from her seat and throw herself at the judge. *'You can't do this!'* she screamed. *'You've got no proof! He's innocent!'*

A court official tried to stop her, but she shoved him aside. Mum—quiet, kind, *sensible* Mum—had

turned into a ferocious beast. She reached the judges' table and climbed onto it, lashing out at anybody who tried to restrain her. She grabbed the judge by the collar of his scarlet and black robe, thrust her face close to his. '*Take back what you just said!*' she yelled. '*Take it back! You know he's innocent. This isn't justice!*'

Panic-stricken, Hanna, Ned, and Jik tried to get to her—but there were too many people in the way. Alarm bells shrilled. Armed police, batons raised, burst into the courtroom. Mum was grabbed by the neck. Other policemen seized Dad, thrusting his arms hard up behind his back, making him shout out in agony. The judge and his two assistants picked up their papers and scurried out of a side exit. 'That's my mum!' Ned was screaming, wrestling with anybody in his way as he fought to reach her. 'Take your hands off my mum!'

Hanna was fighting too. She managed to get to Dad, and hold on to him. For a split second their eyes met. He was saying something to her, she realized—repeating the same two words over and over again. But what were they? It was impossible to tell with all the shouting and screaming. She tried to get him to speak louder, but a baton descended painfully on her arm and her grip was broken. She watched helplessly as he was dragged out of the court and thrust into a waiting police

van. Mum was carried out after him and thrown kicking into a second van. Sirens howling, the vehicles accelerated away.

The crowd was growing by the minute as more and more people arrived, attracted by the noise. With Mum and Dad gone, their attention turned to the children. '*Anak kriminal!*' they were screaming. '*Anak kriminal!*'

Hanna knew enough Indonesian to understand what they were saying. They were accusing the three of them of being criminals—child criminals. Punches were thrown. Jik, the Sea Gypsy boy, let out a yelp of pain as a fist caught him in the mouth, making the blood flow. '*We go!*' he yelled at Hanna and Ned, fighting to get away. '*We go now!*'

Fresh police charged into the courtroom, batons flailing. A gap opened up behind them. Seizing their chance, the children dashed for the door.

They reached it, and were through. Three men had spotted them, and were giving chase. Dodging flowerpots and benches, Hanna, Ned, and Jik sprinted through the open doors of the court building and out into the sunlit street of the East Borneo capital. One of their pursuers soon gave up—but the other two were young and fit. '*Anak kriminal!*' they were screaming, their faces distorted with hatred. They were catching up fast.

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There was a *warung*—a small eating-house—opposite. Jik, who was in the lead, dodged into it. Hanna and Ned followed him. The diners looked up from their food in surprise, as the three children dashed through, scattering chairs, heading for the kitchen. The owner, a thin man with bad teeth, was stir-frying something in a wok. He shouted angrily as they barged past him and into the alley behind the shop.

Their pursuers were close behind, but they were large men, and the kitchen was tiny. There was a cry of pain. One of them had collided with the wok and had splashed himself with hot cooking oil. His companion stopped to help him.

Seizing their chance to escape, the children raced along the alley at high speed. Up ahead was a main road. If they could reach it in time, they could maybe disappear into the crowd and get away.

But there were police sirens, growing louder by the second. They seemed to be coming from all directions at once.

On one side of the alley was a deep storm drain. It was half-full of water and floating garbage. It ran underneath the main road in a tunnel and came out on the other side. Jik pointed at it. 'We go in there!' he yelled.

Hanna opened her mouth to protest, but she

was too late. The Sea Gypsy boy had already leapt into the drain. The slimy black water came up to his knees. He disappeared from sight underneath the road.

Ned was next.

Holding her nose, Hanna followed.

She was just in time. A powerful police motorcycle had turned into the alleyway and was speeding towards them. Praying that they hadn't been spotted, she waded quickly towards the boys.

They waited in the gloom, holding their breaths. The motorbike roared to a halt above their heads. A police car, its siren wailing, drew up next to it. They heard voices. 'What are they saying?' Hanna asked Jik.

'They're asking if anybody has seen the criminals.'

'We're not criminals!' Ned protested loudly.

'Quiet!' Jik ordered. 'Or they goddam hear you!'

More cars pulled up. It was as if the entire Sangabera police force had decided to hold a rally right above their heads. Surely somebody must think of looking into the drain beneath their wheels?

Nobody did. After a few minutes, doors slammed, engines started up, and the vehicles roared off.

Silence fell. Trembling with shock, Hanna peered around her. Floating nearby was what looked like an old sack.

It wasn't.

It was a dog. It had obviously been dead for a long time. Most of its fur was missing, and its swollen belly was split open like an over-stuffed cushion. Where its intestines had once been was a writhing mass of maggots.

'We've got to get out of here,' she gasped. 'We'll catch a disease.'

She turned to go, but Jik grabbed her. 'Wait,' he hissed. 'Maybe there is still a policeman up there. Maybe they play a dam trick to make us think they have all gone.'

'But this is horrible!' Ned protested.

'Better than go to goddam jail!'

They forced themselves to stand still and wait. There was a gentle current and, to Hanna's horror, the dead dog began to drift towards her. She felt it bump softly—slimily—against her bare legs.

She tried to push it away, but it came back again. And again.

'I don't care if there are policemen up there!' she exclaimed, unable to stand any more. 'I'm not staying here a moment longer!'

Her words were drowned by a violent clap of thunder.

A tropical storm, which had been building all morning, was breaking above their heads. As lightning flashed, torrential rain began to cascade from the sky, drumming on the hard surface of the road, sluicing into the culverts.

Within seconds the water level inside the drain had risen to chest height. They had to get out of their hiding place fast!

Half walking, halfswimming, terrified of slipping and being swept away, the children staggered towards the light. They were just in time. As the water hit the top of the tunnel, filling it completely, they pulled themselves clear, and lay gasping on the concrete surround. The dead dog shot past after them, shedding maggots like passengers from a sinking ship. It surged away down the drain and out of sight.

They stayed where they were for long time, not moving, letting the rain wash the filth from their bodies. There were all sorts of diseases you could catch from dirty water, Hanna knew—typhoid, cholera. She prayed that nobody had swallowed any.

The storm ended as quickly as it had begun, and the sun came out again. The three children pulled themselves slowly to their feet, not knowing what to do next. As they did so, a voice made them freeze. '*Like drowned rats,*' it said in English. '*Like*

three drowned rats!'

They spun on their heels. A man was squatting in a nearby doorway. He was young—in his late twenties it looked like—wearing jeans and a faded black T-shirt. His hair was scraped into a tight ponytail. He grinned at them, then glanced downwards into his lap.

He was cradling a long-barrelled handgun.