

Pandora

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We were twelve nautical miles north of the Canary Islands. The sun was high and the wind was pushing the sails hard.

I loved it. Getting soaked from spray, sunburned, feeling the speed, the *force* of the yacht, screaming through the chop.

We were a crew of seven, all guys, aged fourteen to sixteen, plus first mate Dan, who was a couple of years older than us, and our captain, Jake Wilson. He was thin, ropey-strong, in charge of the boat, and of getting us in shape for the Youth Sail Challenge.

It was good. We were working together, getting a handle on what to do. I didn't feel like the seasick

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rooky who'd stepped off the plane days earlier. I'd even made friends, Sam and Pete.

I was told to take the wheel and keep *Pandora* steady, while Wilko answered a radio call. His head popped out of the cabin. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but took a breath and swallowed.

'Okay?' I said.

'Squall to the north. We're heading home. We need to winch up the tender.'

The crew's heads turned, like meerkats scanning the sea. The sun was dead over. I couldn't tell which way was north, but there were no clouds in any direction. The wind was strong, but not fierce.

'You sure?' I said.

'Yes! I just got off the radio. The wind's going to change too. Let's just get the tender up, yeah?'

The tender was the ship-to-shore rowing boat we were pulling. I was a novice sailor, but even I knew there was no need to winch it up. Not unless Wilko was intending to sail *Pandora* fast. I didn't question him, I did what I was told. We all did. Dan took the wheel and three of us helped Wilko with the boat. Then we took down the regular sails and put up a storm jib. In the time it took to do that, the steady southwester that had been pushing us all morning died, and a fresh wind came from the north. With the sail up, *Pandora* made a huge, arcing turn. The wind filled the sail and the yacht ran like some beast off a leash. We were riding raw power.

Someone shouted: 'Look!' The horizon behind was a blur, a thin line of night. One minute it hadn't been there, the next it was. Far away, but creeping closer.

'What now?' I said.

'Well, for a start, Bill, you can get your lifejacket on,' said Dan.

I'd taken mine off, when I'd changed my t-shirt, and hadn't put it back on. I hadn't even noticed I wasn't wearing it. I dived for the cabin, grabbed it and came back on deck.

The fun had stopped. A cold stone of fear settled in my gut. I looked at the lifejacket I was holding, *willed* my hands to move, but they were trembling. I was about to put it on when we hit a wave and I stumbled, fell and dropped the lifejacket, just dropped it, clumsily and uselessly. I watched it slip and slide off the deck and into the water.



The wind began to rage. Waves heaved and pitched, as if the sea had been storm-savaged for days, not minutes. Wilko kept Dan and two others – the most competent – and told the rest of us to go to the cabin. But I stayed on deck. I had to watch, to see what was happening.

Pandora handled it at first. The sail strained and billowed, urging us forwards. But every time I turned to look, the storm seemed closer. Clouds streamed across the sky. And the wind veered this way, then that, making *Pandora* judder and stutter.

Wilko slipped and lost his grip on the wheel, leaving it spinning wildly. We went side on, with *Pandora* leaning into the sea. A crest smashed over the side, soaking me. I struggled to get upright, numbed by the force of the wave. Gasping with the shock.

There was metal sky above us now, and light ahead. It was a race to the light, but we were losing. The storm drew over us like a cloak.

Ahead was a vast mound of water, a mountain, swelling into a monster, surging and rising.

Wilko had the wheel again, spinning it hard, getting us straight on to face the wave. We went down a trough, sliding sideways as though a giant hand was pulling us.

I saw then, in the water: a shadow. For a second. Something huge, something close.

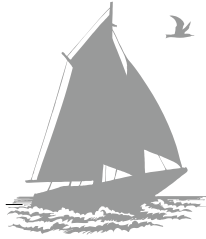
We went over the peak, tumbled down the face of a wave. The bow nosedived. The sea ate *Pandora*. The sky fell. A sky of water. We went under and there was a judder, a shock against the whole boat. I held on, battered by the rush of water.

We came up, gasping, scanning the sea for the next wave. But the one that got us had been a freak.

‘Thank God,’ I panted.

Wilko turned *Pandora* and barked orders. He set his jaw, his eyes dead ahead.

‘That was a warning,’ he said. ‘There’ll be others.’



I waited for *Pandora* to steady herself, to set us off, to beat the storm. But she dragged. I thought of the shadow. What had we hit? A rock? A whale?

Dan's panicked face appeared at the cabin hatch.

'Water!' he shouted.

I ran to look. Three of the lads sat at the table, watching in disbelief as seawater covered their ankles, then their shins. They drew their legs up.

Think, think, I said to myself. 'Don't panic, it's from the wave.'

But was it? The water was sloshing about so much it was hard to tell.

'Take the wheel,' I heard Wilko yell at Dan. He scrambled into the cabin.

Time slipped and rushed, quick as the wind.

Wilko panicking; fumbling, to get the electric pump working.

Wilko kicking it when it failed.

Wilko grabbing the radio mic and shouting, 'May-day,' and the co-ordinates, over and over and over.

The radio crackling and whistling:

'We hear you *Pandora*, can you...'

And the voice drowning in a rage of howls and crashes.

The boat spinning.

Wilko getting the hand-pump working, for ten seconds, before he realised: water *was* filling the boat, really, really fast.

The boys at the table, trying to escape the rising water. Pete crying: 'Why is this happening?'

'The tender,' I said.

'No, there's a life raft,' said Wilko, 'an inflatable in the hold. The rowboat would be useless.'

He got busy hauling the raft out. We helped drag the thing on deck and unwrapped it, like a huge orange tent out of a bag. Wilko pulled a handle. The raft inflated in seconds. It was a dinghy, a solid ring of air-filled tube, with a canopy and zipped door. It had a long rope attached, which Wilko tied to the gunnels.

'Help me,' he said. Together we picked it up and hurled it onto the water. I was at the rear of the group; a huddle of scared, soaked lads. Wilko climbed over the gunnel and down the ladder.

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‘You can’t go first!’ someone shouted. But Wilko wasn’t. He stood, one hand gripping the ladder, the other holding the rope and pulling the raft close.

‘One at a time. Climb down and round me.’

The wind thrashed the flapping sails. *Pandora* rolled. The world was seesaw sick.

We hustled and jostled. Pete squeezing past Wilko then using the rope and flinging himself head first through the opening of the raft, vanishing into safety.

Another followed. Same procedure.

‘Hurry up!’ someone screamed, trying to push past the others.

The raft rose and fell. One second Wilko was waist-deep, the next clear.

We all wanted to be next, but not to look desperate. I tried not to panic; *forced* myself not to thrust my way forwards.

‘Keep in a queue,’ Dan said. But it sounded ridiculous.

‘What about supplies?’ said Sam.

‘Just get in!’ Wilko yelled.

Sam did as he was told. We all did.

But what Sam had said made sense. No one knew where we were. Not exactly. We could be out there for days. And there were three more in front, before it was my turn to get into the raft.

Pandora was filling with water so I had to be quick. I raced to the cabin, grabbed a hold-all bag and

emptied it. The cupboard door swung open. I took tins and bottles, as much as I could carry.

Time slowed. I tried to climb the sloping deck, back to the stern. They were all on the raft. Even Dan hadn't waited. There was just Wilko, still holding the rope to the yacht, urging me to hurry. I wanted to give the bag to him, but it was awkward. He had to let go of either the rope or the ladder to get it. He chose the rope, took the bag, swinging it into waiting hands.

But there was too much space between him and the raft. He swung again, teetered, and fell into the water.

Wilko vanished, appeared, vanished, appeared, held in the surging swell.

The raft ran off till the rope was taut. A chasm of churning water lay between me and it.

Somehow Wilko found the rope and pulled himself along it, till he reached the raft and they hauled him in.

They tried to pull the rope, to get the raft closer to *Pandora*, but the sea was holding it away, straining the rope hard.

I put a foot over the side, forcing steel into my gut, ready to grab the rope and let my body fall in the water. I took a breath and—

The rope snapped. Whiplashed into the sea.

The raft shot away, swallowed by waves and sheets of windblown spray.

The last I saw was their horrified faces. The last I heard was their shouts drowning in the wind.



I froze. Half off the boat, clinging to the ladder for long seconds. Not believing.

But I couldn't wait, or think. I climbed back on board and rushed to the cabin. It was filling quickly. I made myself jump in, fighting panic, fighting the fear that I'd be held in there, that I'd die. I waded through. Too slow. The water nightmare thick. I grabbed a plastic bag, and filled it in a blur of action. Tins, water bottles, book and pen. My hands just grabbed stuff without thinking. I must have found the knife too, though I don't remember that.

I chucked the bag in the tender, winched it down and climbed in, cutting the rope before the sinking yacht could suck me down with it.

Like the raft, I was taken, pushed and whirled away from *Pandora* and into chaos. I kept in the centre, sitting low on the floor, gripping the sides. I went so far, so fast, I didn't even see *Pandora* go under.

I shouted: 'Wilko! Dan! Sam, Pete!'

I was thrown up and over and down valleys of water. Rain fell in sheets. The winds raged. There was no light now, I was lost.

I tried to stay in the middle, but had to move this way or that, when a wave tipped the boat sideways. More than once I thought I'd capsize.

In a moment when the storm slackened, I found the hold at the back of the boat and shoved the bag and bottles inside.

I put the oars on the floor and sat on them, to stop them going overboard.

And held onto the gunnels.



Grey sea and rain, rain and grey sea. The violent rollercoaster of the waves.

The storm roaring and shrieking. Endlessly furious.

I used my cap to bail. Every time I got some out I'd get hit again, or the bow would dive into a wave, and water would flood in.

I had to keep the boat upright. Shifting my weight to one side or the other wasn't enough. So I tried using the oars, to keep the boat on an even keel. But one was snatched in seconds. It vanished in the gloom.

Another wave whacked the boat.

I bailed and bailed. My muscles naggged. And the wind screamed:

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You cannot carry on. I am endless.

On and on and on.

Every wave was going to be the last. The one that got me. The one that filled the tender and tossed me into the sea.

After hours of it I got kind of used to it, but more and more tired, from holding on and bailing. *Kind of* used to it. I got over and down another wave and shouted: 'To hell with you.'

Endless.

'You haven't got me!'

Another wave – *every* wave – that didn't get me was a victory.

Endless.

'I'm going to live. You hear me? I'm going to live!'

I tried to *look* brave, while my gut churned sick with fear. I know that's crazy, I was alone. But I had to look brave, I had to show it.

Hours passed. I couldn't see the waves. I couldn't see the end of the boat.

I bailed and bailed.

But I slowed too.

Muscles became dead weights.

It was winning. I was losing.



I wasn't fighting the storm any more. I was fighting my own body. Its weakness, its smallness.

I hated myself. And almost cried.

'Stop snivelling. Stop!'

I believed I was going to die.



At some point things changed. It let me live. That's how it felt. Whatever it was had been toying with me.

And the monster calmed. I bailed till there was only a little water in the hull, bracing myself for another storm to come out of the dark. But it never did.

I remember staring into the night, holding my cap in my hand, my head spinning.

I don't remember losing the cap. Or passing out.