

# Prologue

## **Sarawak, 1960**

It was the dusted light, sifting from the rainforest canopy that captivated her. In the green illumination the skyscraper trees, living columns bound in twisted vines, towered above the forest floor. Silence prevailed.

The woman, dressed in sturdy cotton slacks and shirt with camera and notebook at the ready, sat comfortably on the layer of rotting leaves where a seed sprouted at the base of a venerable tree. She no longer felt a stranger in this jungle nor was she afraid of being here alone.

She stared upwards to where, far above the floor of the forest, giant ferns, orchids and lichen proliferated on the trees, seeking a place in the sunlight. She still marvelled at the hundred shades of green; the variations of leaf shapes; fruits and seeds ripening to the moment of bursting; and the platoons of insects, birds and animals, small and large, busy at their daily task of survival.

She waited and listened for the faint shudder of branches, the rustle of leaves, the cracking of a small branch high above, that would announce the arrival of those she hoped to see. But the sounds that came to her were unexpected. They came from closer to the river, near the small trail that lead from the camp of tents and palm huts. She waited, holding her breath, thinking perhaps that it was one of the creatures she was yet to see, or perhaps a wandering pygmy rhino, a sun bear or a wild boar.

Then, through the trees, she saw silent movement and glimpsed the shape of two men. One was European, the other a shorter, darker man with

the distinctive hair and profile that signalled that he was indigenous, but he was no one she recognised from the local Iban tribe.

She was about to rise to her feet when her attention was caught by the rattling of swaying treetops.

The two men also stopped, startled by the sound, and gazed upwards as a female orangutan, an infant clinging to her, swung to the next tree.

Thrilled by their arrival, the woman jumped to her feet, but then she stopped in horror.

The European was lifting a rifle, looking through its sights as he aimed skywards. The other man lifted the blow pipe he was carrying, ready to let loose a poison dart.

In Malay she shouted, 'Stop! What are you doing?'

The men spun in shock and the orangutan and infant crashed through the trees out of sight.

The European, startled and angry, shouted at her. 'Get away. What are you doing here?'

The woman strode forward, avoiding roots, pushing vines and branches aside as she made her way towards the men. 'I am from Camp Salang. Who are you? You can't shoot orangutans! They're such beautiful creatures.'

'Who said we are shooting apes? We are hunting for food. Mind your own business, lady.'

She stopped, unnerved by his hostile, threatening manner. She saw the local man moving away, and in seconds he was out of sight. The European moved his rifle menacingly while he stared at her, before he quickly followed his companion into the jungle.

Feeling shaken, the peace and solitude of her surroundings broken by the presence of the two men, she began to retrace her steps. As she approached the small jungle camp carved from the forest at the edge of the river, she saw activity on the tiny landing as the klotok, the village longboat, prepared to head downriver to trade for supplies. Behind it was moored the motor boat she and her husband had travelled in to reach this remote place. She walked on to where he was talking with the village headman. She spoke quietly to her husband, and his reaction was one of surprise and worry.

As soon as he could politely conclude his business, the two of them set off with one of the Iban from the longhouse to the place where she had confronted the two men. The tribesman, so at home in this jungle, moved easily, but the husband and wife soon became breathless as they struggled to keep up. The young man quickly lengthened the distance between them. Through the trees in the dim light they saw that he had stopped and had bent down.

The woman reached him first and let out a cry. Stumbling, her hand to her mouth, she turned away to her husband. He reached the scene and opened

his arms to his stricken wife, shielding her from the terrible sight before them.

A tangled pile of matted orange fur was covered in blood. The stomach of the creature had been gutted but what distressed them even more was that her head, feet and hands had been roughly hacked off.

‘Where’s her baby?’ whispered the woman.

The young man lifted his shoulders and, looking at her husband, said, ‘Gone, tuan. Sold for money.’

‘Poachers. How utterly senseless.’

His wife buried her face in his shirt as he stroked her hair. ‘You start back, dear. Leonard and I will bury the poor creature,’ he said.

‘How I wish we could catch these people. It’s too distressing,’ said his wife through her tears. ‘It’s just too hard. I want to leave here.’

# 1

## **Brisbane, 2009**

The rain fell in sheets that sliced across the windscreen and shone in the lights of oncoming cars. Julie Reagan was glad she had known these suburban streets all her life as she turned into a driveway which ran with the deluge from the summer storm. She pulled up in front of a beautiful big old house, set high on stumps to allow the cooling air to flow beneath the solid wooden floors. The house was encircled by a wide verandah accessed by sandstone steps and atop its pitched roof sat a small, ornate turret. The old Queenslander had an imperious air, perched above the other nearby homes, with its sweeping views

from the verandah, the colonnades of which were smothered in the bright yellow flowers of an alamanda vine.

The young woman turned up the collar of her cotton jacket before racing across the sodden lawn, under a dripping poinciana tree, up the steps and onto the front verandah. She stepped out of her shoes and shook the drips from her hair and shirt. She knew her shoulder-length brown hair was starting to curl in the warm dampness.

Julie opened the carved white front door with its panels of stained glass and paused to hear the news on the TV in the sitting room and inhale the toasty, cheesy smell of something that her mother was cooking. The long, airy hallway with its polished wooden floor, the white wooden fretwork, the floral pattern in the pressed-metal ceilings and the carpet runner that had belonged to her great grandmother – everything was familiar to her.

Bayview had originally been bought by her great grandparents more than one hundred years ago. Her grandmother, Margaret, had lived here and now her parents. Her mother Caroline said that although old Queenslanders were expensive to maintain, she had no wish to give up the comfortable and gracious home where little had changed since she was a schoolgirl. For Julie, the house had always been a constant in her life and, while she valued her career, social life and independence, the idea of not having this wonderful family home was inconceivable.

‘Mum? It’s me.’

‘In the kitchen, Jules.’

‘Not watching the news?’

‘Listening from here. I had to get this out of the oven. Nothing special but as your father is going to be late I’ve indulged myself.’ Caroline Reagan looked at her thirty-two-year-old daughter standing in the doorway and her heart warmed at the sight of her. She saw her regularly but occasionally, like now, she paused and couldn’t help but think of what a lovely looking girl Julie was, with her thick, wavy hair, bright blue eyes, firm square jaw and large, happy mouth. But there was also something else about Julie that Caroline hoped others, meeting her for the first time, would also notice. There was a calmness, strength and warmth that radiated from her even before she spoke.

Caroline turned her attention to the dinner plates. ‘Do you want to stay and eat?’

Julie dropped into her family home a couple of times a week and knew that it wasn’t necessary to stand on ceremony, for her mother was always happy to feed her. Her parents’ fridge was always full of tasty leftovers or the makings of a quick meal.

‘I wasn’t, but it smells good and that rain is atrocious. So I’ll wait for awhile, if that’s okay?’

‘Do stay, sweetie. I’ve been hoping you’d call by.’

‘Oh, why is that?’ Julie could tell from her voice that Mother Had News.

'Heard from Adam and Heather lately?' Julie's mother was always hoping that Julie's married brother in South Australia would announce the imminent arrival of a baby.

'Yes. But nothing really exciting to report. Oh, they've found some fabulous old recycled timbers which they're going to use in their renovations, but no big news to speak of.'

Julie smiled to herself. It mightn't be news in big letters to her mother but she could imagine how pleased Adam must have been at finding a treasure for the mud brick home he and Heather were creating in the Adelaide Hills. 'So what news do you have?'

'I'll tell you in a minute. Pour us a small drink. How's work?' asked her mother.

'The same. Hectic. Trying to help get some new companies on the map is always hard.'

'Well, I guess that's what a marketing consultant gets paid to do. Give them good advice.' Her mother wiped her hands on a tea towel and led the way into the living room as Julie followed her with two glasses of chilled white wine.

Caroline turned off the TV and settled herself on the sofa. 'We'll eat in a minute. It's just macaroni and cheese and a little salad. I want you to read this first.' She handed Julie a letter from the coffee table.

Julie put down her glass. 'Is it from someone you know?'

'No. But it's an interesting letter.'

Julie scanned the letterhead of one of Queensland's universities and noted the signature, Dr David Cooper. Intrigued, she read the letter slowly.

*Dear Mrs Reagan,*

*I hope you don't mind my contacting you, but I am an associate professor in the Department of Anthropology, currently researching the Iban people of Borneo with a special focus on the changes to their methods of agriculture, social structure and lifestyle given their loss of habitat and resettlement from their previous existence as jungle and river dwellers in Sarawak. In the course of my research in Malaysia I came across a small book, My Life with the Headhunters of Borneo by Bette Oldham, which was published in the seventies, and in which she recounts a period of time spent with a local group of Iban in Sarawak. The author was, I believe, your aunt.*

*I would, of course, very much like to know more about Bette Oldham and her work. If you can help me at all, I'd very much appreciate it. I can be contacted at the above address or email, or phone.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Dr David Cooper*

'Good grief!' exclaimed Julie. 'Is this the Aunt Bette that Gran was always

so critical of? Did you know that Aunt Bette lived with the headhunters of Borneo? It sounds amazing.'

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Tell us in 25 words or less why you would like to visit the Four Seasons Hotel in Langkawi, Malaysia.

To enter, fill out the form below, and email your answer and details.

Your Entry...

Your details...

Name

Email

Phone

I have read the [terms and conditions](#)

I would like to receive further information about Di Morrissey