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A Taste for Green Tangerines

Written by Barbara Bisco

Published by Black Lotus Publishing Ltd

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A TASTE FOR GREEN TANGERINES

Barbara Bisco

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ISBN: 978-0-9560276-0-3

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by
The Good News Press Ltd
Ongar, Essex, UK, CM5 9RX

Published by
BLACK LOTUS PUBLISHING LTD
25 Belsize Crescent
London, UK, NW3 5QY
Registered under the Companies House Act
Number 5,928,807
website: www.blacklotuspublishing.com

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CHAPTER ONE

A wave of excitement, tinged with a flicker of apprehension, swept over Bethany Parker as she peered out the window of the tiny Twin Otter plane that was taking her deep into the interior of Borneo. Below her the rainforest stretched out in a vast jumble of dark green, emerald green, lime green, every kind of green and she wondered, as she had for the thousandth time since she had left London, just how suited she was for a career as an anthropologist.

She supposed she should have thought of that sooner, at least, that's what her boy friend Nigel Compton had said after she had told him about Kanyalang.

'What's that?' he had asked, without much interest.

'An eco-tourism project in Indonesia.'

'Good God, what do you want to go there for?'

'It sounds like an exciting idea, a research centre, some sort of conservation effort too, that will be financed by the profits from a luxury hotel.'

Nigel showed no sign of finding this exciting at all.

'Of course, I'm just a last minute substitute,' Bethany continued, 'because Professor Brown, you remember the American I was doing research for last term, had to let them down. But I suppose it can't be that easy to find someone who can just drop everything and take off for Borneo at a moment's notice.'

'Quite,' Nigel had said.

'But luckily for me, I can.'

'Lucky?' Nigel had sounded astonished.

'Everyone in the anthropology department thinks it is,' she had insisted. 'They would all kill for a chance like this.'

'Everyone at the bank would kill to avoid it,' Nigel had replied, acidly.

This had prompted a heated exchange about lifestyle choices but they were so used to bickering these days that it hadn't deterred Nigel from turfing Pumpkin the cat off the bed, tumbling Bethany down onto it and kissing her where he imagined she liked it most.

She had nearly pushed him off so they could talk about how a year and a half apart would affect their relationship but it hadn't seemed like the right time. After a few brief minutes of foreplay she had felt him plunging down inside her and as usual had faked the enthusiasm he seemed to think his performance merited.

Oddly enough, the right time for that conversation about their future together had never quite arrived. Instead, they had settled for a sort of unspoken agreement to put things on hold while she was away. They would keep in touch, of course, Nigel would take care of Pumpkin, and they would see how they felt when she got back.

Almost before she knew it, he had been seeing her off at Heathrow and she had been on her way to her first job as a full-fledged anthropologist.

Yet now, as the plane was crossing and re-crossing the path of a meandering mud-brown river, Bethany was a little less sure about some of the lifestyle choices she had made. For instance, how was somebody who hated snakes as much as she did going to get along in the rainforest? And could she live without a corner shop that sold Mars bars? And how would she manage when her supply of anti-frizz shampoo ran out? Was she making a terrible mistake?

No, of course not, she told herself firmly, she was just totally exhausted. After all, it had barely been three weeks since she had heard about the job and the time had passed in such a frenzy of activity that she had hardly slept at all. She lay back in the seat, closed her eyes and for a moment almost wished she was back in the safety and security of her tiny flat in Islington with Pumpkin purring softly on one side of her and Nigel made hissing sounds through his teeth on the other.

Gradually, as the plane droned on, the throbbing of the engines began to take on the rhythm of Pumpkin's purring and she drifted into a light doze.

She had no idea how long she slept but when she opened her eyes again she was shocked to see that the luxuriant green of the forest canopy had been replaced by the barren grey of a moonscape. For a moment, nothing made sense to her. Then she remembered about all the logging that was going on and the damage it was doing to

the equatorial rainforest. She had read about it, of course, but the scene below her had an emotional impact that the printed word hadn't delivered. Nothing could possibly be left alive down there, she thought, turning away from the window with a shudder, nothing except rats, anyway.

It was a while before she could bring herself to look out again but when she did, she was relieved to see that they were once again flying over the myriad greens of a living rainforest. And when she sensed the plane beginning to lose altitude for the approach to the airstrip at Putussibau, her enthusiasm for the adventure ahead of her came flooding back.

She was drawing in her first breath of the hot, humid air of Borneo, redolent of garlic and spices and animal dung, when a tall man with a slightly Asian cast to his features called out her name.

'Bethany?' he asked, coming toward her and holding out his hand.

She nodded.

'I'm Bima Van Wick,' he said, in a deep voice tinged with a Dutch accent, 'from Kanyalang. I'm the lucky one who got to come and meet you.' And nodding in the direction of a small helicopter a few hundred yards away, he added, 'The pilot's waiting for us. It will just be a short ride from here so we should be there in time for lunch.'

Bethany had never been in a helicopter before, and the rapidity of the vertical ascent gave her an alarming sensation of having left her stomach somewhere on the ground. Fortunately, it didn't take long to reach cruising altitude, and her insides managed to catch up with the rest of her.

Bima launched into a running commentary on the landscape as they went along but Bethany had some trouble following it over the noise of the rotor blades.

'We're leaving the lowlands now,' he was saying. 'See, the rivers are much narrower here and some of them, like the one that runs in front of Kanyalang, are barely navigable a good part of the year. That's mostly because of the rocks, but the rapids are a problem, too. Unfortunately though, we aren't really high enough to escape the heat.'

'I won't mind that,' Bethany yelled back. 'Non-stop summer will be heaven after London.'

'You might change your mind when steam starts coming out of your ears,' Bima laughed. Then a moment later his tone became serious as he said, 'Look down there and you'll see what the loggers have done.'

She did, and saw an expanse of stripped and denuded terrain much like the one she had flown over earlier.

'That's not going to go on anywhere near us, is it?' she asked, in alarm.

'I hope not,' he said. 'Fortunately we're right on the edge of a huge conservation area so we should be alright.'

'That's a relief,' she said, but she wasn't certain he heard her. She suspected that his deeper voice carried more effectively over engine noise than hers did so she contented herself with the role of a listener.

'We've all been looking forward to your arrival,' he said. 'At the moment, the research team has only got a botanist, that's Marguarita Barnet, and a zoologist, Catherine Everton, so we've been very much in need of an anthropologist. If the people who actually live in the rainforest are ignored it could make the whole project look bad.'

'Where do you come in?'

'More on the tourism side of things,' he said, 'the part that's supposed to bring in the money to support the research centre. I'm an architect and I designed the hotel. I usually just pop in now and then to check on things once the construction actually gets started but Kanyalang is my all-time pet project and it's so isolated that I'm staying around to keep an eye on things.'

He had barely finished explaining this when he drew her attention to a cluster of simple thatched-roofed structures nestled in the bend of a river.

'There it is,' he announced, 'that's Kanyalang. As you can see, we've kept everything entirely in the style of the local Maloh Dayak people, on the outside at least. We'll try to do that as much as possible on the inside too, but we'll have to make a few concessions to meet the demands of the affluent twenty-first century tourist.'

'Such as?' she asked.

'Well, decent showers and things like air conditioning in the bedrooms and –'

'Won't that sort of spoil the effect?' interrupted Bethany.

'Not if we do it right, using solar panels and things like that.'

'But on a thatched roof –' protested Bethany.

'Good God, no, we'll put them in a separate clearing fifty meters or so from the hotel and channel the power to the rest of the compound from there. In the meantime we're making do with a couple of generators and –' He broke off, aware that Bethany was no longer listening.

The helicopter had begun its descent and her attention was riveted on the scene below.

Bethany wasted no time clambering out onto the landing pad and surveying the clearing around her. From the tops of the tallest trees, some of them so high they stole the lion's share of sunlight for themselves, to the vines and lianas that twined their way snake-like up the bark of their unwilling hosts, to the moss and fallen leaves that carpeted the forest floor, she saw a world of green.

'It's more beautiful than I ever thought possible,' she exclaimed, as her eyes drank in the countless species of palm trees, ferns and shrubs that surrounded her.

'But you haven't seen anything yet,' Bima protested. 'Come on, I'll show you where we all live. Don't worry about your cases. Someone can bring them up for you later.'

'Great,' she said and felt that she was in heaven as they started down a wide path where the vegetation that pressed in from either side was so thick that it almost gave the effect of a tunnel.

They hadn't gone far when the illusion of heaven came under attack. A disgusting stench, one so revolting that she thought for a minute she was going to be sick, assaulted her nostrils.

'What's that?' she asked.

'Just this,' laughed Bima, indicating a plant with an unabashedly phallic-shaped flower, 'something called Maiden's Veil. The thing to do is just hurry past it as fast as you can.'

She followed his advice and quickened her pace even though the heat and the humidity were so intense that she soon felt like she had been dipped in a kettle of steaming water but she forgot about the temperature when they reached a clearing beside a shallow river.

There, looming up in front of her, stood a wooden house, one that was so long it seemed to go on forever, balanced serenely on a series of ironwood pilings.

Bethany immediately recognised the style of a traditional Dayak longhouse in its high thatch roof designed for maximum coolness, its wide veranda where the life of an entire community could take place, and its tall pillars that kept the main part of the structure some twenty feet above the ground.

'This is where we all live,' Bima said, proudly, 'but I have to admit, we've cheated a bit on the access. Everybody rebelled at the idea of climbing up and down a notched log like the locals do whenever they wanted to go in or out so I put in wooden steps with a handrail instead.'

Bethany regarded Bima's innovation doubtfully, wishing that it looked a little sturdier but she didn't want to seem like a wimp so she kept her reservations to herself.

'Everybody's probably on the veranda by now,' he said, glancing at his watch, 'relaxing and having something cold to drink before lunch. At least, that's what we like to do if we have time. Anyway, so let's go up and see. With any luck you can meet the whole crowd at once.'

He was right about the veranda and the drinks, but no one was relaxing. Tension hung like a tangible presence in the air.

Bima sensed that something was very wrong, but was about to go ahead and introduce Bethany anyway when Elliot Martin, the project leader, strode out and cut him off in mid-sentence.

'Tarique's dead,' Elliot announced, gruffly.

A chill that defied the heat of the Borneo noon swept over the little group on the veranda as they absorbed the news. Tarique Radjeb had been very much alive at breakfast that morning.

Catherine was the first to react. 'It can't be true,' she cried, leaping up and rushing off to the dead man's room.

She found him there, stretched out in perfect stillness on the bed.

'You fucking bastard,' she hissed, to the inert form, 'you can't do this to me.' And as a wave of morning sickness washed over her, she reached out and slapped the unresponsive face. 'Get up, damn you. Get up.'

Tarique, enveloped in the indifference of death, did not stir.

Outside on the veranda, a state of collective shock prevailed and Bethany's arrival was barely acknowledged.

'How did it happen?' Bima rasped when he had recovered the power of speech.

'Snake bite,' Elliot replied, grimly.

'But we've got a first aid kit, for God's sake,' Bima protested. 'It must have an antidote for something like that.'

'The snake was a banded krait,' Elliot explained, 'and Tarique was nearly an hour's walk away from the longhouse when it happened. There wasn't time.'

'Jesus,' was all Bima could say.

'Better try Allah,' a bearded Australian named Mike Roberts muttered in a heavy Queensland accent. 'Tarique was Muslim.'

'Yeah, well, it looks to me like Allah wasn't on his side this morning,' said John Wolfenson, an American with sharp eyes and a beaky nose known as Wolf.

'Either that or he changed his mind about protecting the bastard, decided he wasn't worth making an effort for,' suggested Mike.

'Smuggling a shit like that into heaven would be no easy task, that's for sure,' added Wolf.

'Hey, watch it,' said Bima. His mother had been a Javanese Muslim.

'Sorry,' Wolf mumbled hastily, 'I wasn't thinking.'

Elliot, his mind on the troublesome obligations that were certain to fall on him as a result of the morning's events, barely noticed the altercation between the two men. 'Damn Tarique,' he was saying to himself, 'and damn the snake and damn Borneo.'

The first thing he'd better do, he decided, was go down to the office and ring Tarique's wife. He dreaded being the one to give