

O C A S O P R E S S : A N O V E L

The Land of Gold



Colin Holcombe

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by Colin Holcombe

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THE LAND OF GOLD

—A NOVEL—

Colin Holcombe

CHAPTER ONE

They're in good spirits, he thought, as he tried to sketch the gestures of the one woman in the group. He saw the mocking smile as she ended some comment that made her companions roar with laughter, but he couldn't catch the words. Henshall transferred his attention to a group at a nearby table, noticing on looking up that the party-giver had left her boisterous companions. Then she was back, strolling away from him, shawl draped on her shoulders. Exasperated, he propped the sketch pad on a chair, and went to help himself to the next course, seeing the woman now making

her exit, waving to guests as she climbed the flower-hung steps to disappear into the foyer.

Henshall finished his meal and looked out. The palms rose dark against the sky, and the candle lights on tables bobbed and glimmered across the lawn until lost in the pale expanse that marked the beach. Whatever the commercialism, he thought, or the threadbare poverty of its villages, Bali was still the fabulous east, and he could see why expatriates were drawn to the exotic, even to women who lacked the nuances of understanding that kept couples together. For an hour he tried to sketch the scene, but when the gamelan orchestra packed up, and there was only the odd tourist left, Henshall settled the bill and walked the three miles back to his own lodgings through a night still warm and smelling of frangipani and dry leaves.

A mist blotted out the view when he woke the following morning. He pulled on a sweater and sat on the veranda, ordering a nasi goreng when the houseboy appeared under a dripping green umbrella. A couple of women went by with bundles of

vegetables on their heads, and there were several of the small dogs of Bali, padding warily past with their usual craven and preoccupied air. The morning grew chilly as he finished his meal, but the trip was one he was funding himself, and he went out as though prospecting, for all that mineral exploration was tiresome, moving him on before he could absorb his surroundings.

In the afternoon he rode over to the Bali Beach Hotel, where he joined guests returned from rained-off tours. A weak sun glowed on the metal table as he sat with a couple of English women comparing handicraft prices. Henshall drank his tea slowly, and leafed through the guidebook, wondering who'd advise him on the village festivals so lavishly photographed. When the women left, still complaining about local practices, Henshall read on and was not sure what the voice had said, or whether it had asked anything at all. 'You're more than welcome', he said. 'I'm leaving shortly.' The voice behind him laughed and said, 'That's not what I meant.' Perhaps his surprise showed, for the

face gleamed with mischief, the water glistening on the long eyelashes. 'You don't recognize me, but I know you.' Henshall opened his mouth to reply, but she was already sauntering off, down the tiled steps to the swimming pool. All that day and the days following, Henshall could see in his mind the extraordinary face with the dark eyes, the features laughing at him, but their owner didn't reappear.

It was in a small village in the hills where he was sketching four of the little girls waiting to receive a sprinkling of holy water before their Legong dance, that someone settled beside him and took the pad from his hand. He knew the identity, even before the playful voice said, 'This will get you into trouble, my friend.' Henshall let her flip through the sketch pad, watching her turn the pages round to study them carefully. 'Where am I?' she asked. 'These aren't bad, but what have you done with me?' Henshall explained that her studies were in another pad, a smaller one he kept for social occasions. For spying, she decided: why else would he draw?

'It's harmless enough', said Henshall. 'Trains the eye.'

'It is not harmless to us.'

'Something to talk about at lunch perhaps?'

'Oh that is much too forward', she said. You must introduce yourself properly when you invite someone out in Bali.'

'Peter Henshall. Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?'

'Hartini Sujono', replied the woman, springing to her feet and again laughing at him.

When they were sat in a local eating-house, Hartini prodding the old crone into frying some fish and sending off for fresh papaya, Henshall could look more closely at the arrival. Not wholly Javanese, he realized, but taller, a straighter nose and jaw, with a warmer complexion, and an openness that seemed to surround and take possession of what he was saying—when it cared to, and wasn't holding itself for his inspection and admiration. Henshall brought the conversation back to their

surroundings, to the village with its straggle of dusty coconut palms and the terraces of *padi* that towered above them, fresh and green in the afternoon light.

‘Think I was looking for you?’ countered the head, turning on him again.

‘Just wondered how you got here.’

‘Hired a car. You came here yesterday as well, didn’t you?’ She pointed a fork. ‘The young man who makes pictures.’

‘Wouldn’t go on too much about the young man. He’s a good bit older than you.’

‘Hartini is twenty-seven.’

‘And Peter is thirty-four.’

The woman whistled. ‘Thirty-four’, she mocked, drawing out the syllables. ‘A man of distinction, of mature years. With many children: banyak anak-anak?’

‘I’m not married as it happens. Is that wrong?’

'It is irresponsible. A man should always marry and have children, even if he doesn't care for women. Never been tempted?'

'Not for a while', he said, reaching for the papaya.

'Is that a broken heart?' she said, resting chin on hands. 'How romantic.'

'Was it?'

'So what did you expect? Guarantees? Peter Henshall, you're not one to see the world through coloured glass. No castles in the air for our travelled Englishman.'

'That doesn't seem a helpful line', he observed, now starting to divide the fruit between the two plates. A bluebottle buzzed through and settled somewhere on the atap awning. 'But you're right', he said, handing her portion over, 'I'm just passing through.'

'I'm surprised to hear that', she said, lolling her head as though to make him out.

'No doubt we make the world we need.'

'That is the wisdom of experience, is it?' She smiled to herself, and started on the fruit, appearing not to listen further.

'Wouldn't you agree?' he persisted, watching the pieces disappear into the large mouth.

She paused and looked up, a mischievous look under the dark eyebrows. 'So let's ask what brought you here. Looking for work?'

'Should I be?' The change of tone surprised him, and he frowned, the two creases giving the face a quietly humoured look.

'I thought you might ask for openings at dinner tonight', she said. 'But perhaps you won't.'

'That's without the usual admirers? After the shameless performance the other night.'

'Oh I think I can make an evening free. Just the once, for our mature Englishman.'

Henshall walked the woman to her car. Bundling equipment on the back of his motorbike, he drove to Kuta and the Hotel Bali Beach, where he checked in without pausing to reflect. Hang the

expense, he muttered as he waited for his call to come through. Frank Norbury, Metax Mining's man in Kuala Lumpur, expressed no surprise, but said, 'Very well, Mr Henshall. I'll see if there's still an opening in the Mapura operation. We'll look forward to hearing from you in a few days.'

A different woman presented herself when Henshall appeared at eight that evening. With a slight inflection of the head, Hartini, now turned out in a short cocktail number, allowed him to escort her over to the far side of the lawn, away from the band and the spotlit dancefloor.

'So what do you think?' he said when she opened her bag and peered into the make-up mirror. 'Should we get business over with?'

She looked up.

'Just a thought', he said, watching her carefully.

The return was unnerving. 'All this amateur psychology comes from reading?' she said at last. 'Long hours on your own, Mr Henshall?'

'I try to stay abreast of events. To understand this Suvarnabhumi of yours.'

'This what?'

'So the old Hindu kingdoms called it.'

'We call it the land of shadows, Mr Henshall. Not the land of gold.'

'Do you now?' he said. 'Such a beautiful place, and all you think of is shadow puppets, the other side of life.'

'Is there some agenda we're following?' She put the bag down, and frowned at him.

'I'd like to know how I could be of service to you.'

'To me, Hartini Sujono?' She seemed amused, but then clicked the bag shut, as though excluding him. 'Well, if you're going to Australia. You are, aren't you?'

'I might get a job here.'

'You could take a parcel out for me. I can't take it myself, and it's got to be someone I trust. Would you do that?'

'Just a parcel?'

'It won't weigh you down.'

He glanced at her quickly, and thought he saw an earnestness as the gaze settled and moved on. 'Not drugs or anything?' he said.

'A manuscript. Just a few hundred pages.'

'Why don't you carry it out yourself?'

'Because I don't have a passport. And anyway they'd search me and take it away.' She shrugged. 'Listen, I'm an undesirable. I did have a passport, with my husband. We travelled a lot: to the States, to Holland, performing. It was a good combination. For a time we were very popular. Are you following me?'

'Yes, your English is much too good to have been learnt here.'

'I went to school in England, but that's not the point. We were in Jakarta the time of the Sukarno plot. Not communists, just socialist sympathizers, but it didn't make any difference. He was a little man, half Chinese, and not strong. He should have

run as I did, or asked for their authority, but he didn't. I hid in the garden while they took him away.'

'Someone had to work for his release.'

'They shot him at the station, or on the way. Just lined him up, with all the others. The thousands and thousands of them.'

Henshall's look narrowed. 'So,' he said, half knowing the answer, 'what's the manuscript about?'

'The facts. We want people to know what happened.'

'Who's the we?'

'Will you help us do that?'

He stared into the distance, looked at the woman again, and said calmly, 'No doubt a mistake, but for you, Hartini Sujono, I will.'

'You are a good young man', she said, taking his hand for a moment. 'Now you can ask me to dance.'

No more was said of the manuscript, and for the next hour they were an ordinary couple dining out together, a couple who didn't know each other well, as there were long silences, which Henshall mentioned when they walked back to the hotel early, many of the guests still whooping it up around them.

'I think you will honestly try to get the package out', the woman said. 'The rest doesn't matter. I'll be leaving tomorrow anyway.'

Henshall made friends easily with women, but was now disturbed by the news. Slowly he followed her down the corridor, where she left him to get the package. 'And the mailing address?' he said as the bulky document was put into his hands. She took his arm and guided him up the stairs to his room, where she paced about while he extracted some ice from the minibar. 'Rather ships in the night', he said, handing the drink over.

Again there was a look he couldn't place, but she was only saying, 'Peter, just promise me some-

thing. Whatever happens, you will deliver the package.'

'Provided it's what you say it is.'

'Oh you men!' she exclaimed. 'Here, take the thing and read it, will you?'

Three independent witnesses affirm that in the Sungei Lintang village some 28 or 29 men, women and children were snatched from their homes on the night of October 2nd and attacked with parangs, their bodies afterwards being thrown into the river. This appears to have been a spontaneous incident, not incited by the military, but no attempt was subsequently made by the police to investigate the matter, nor to recover the property and belongings seized by the villagers responsible . . .

Our estimates for the Province as a whole are therefore in excess of 8,000 persons and perhaps as many as 20,000 . . .

There was much more in this vein, and Henshall finally put the manuscript down in disgust. 'Was it really as bad as this?' he said.

‘Will you just take the manuscript?’

Henshall had read something of this in his guidebook: the abortive communist coup of 1965, the murder of five generals, the countercoup launched by the army in which large numbers of communists had been killed, the installation of Suharto as the head of the ruling Golkar party. But the words hadn't meant much. Indonesians were an open and friendly people, indifferent to anything but their families and national sports teams. Now there was a deeper side, he realized. Twenty thousand people in one province alone. Dozens killed in every village. He suddenly felt cold in the air-conditioned room, and went to sit on the balcony wall. The woman followed, seating herself carelessly on a chair facing.

‘You still remember, still think about these events?’ he said.

‘They are still with me. Not so painful, but still there, yes.’

‘But this was nine years ago.’

'I did nothing to help him.'

'What could you do? You were seventeen, just a girl.'

'Eighteen. A wife and entertainer. Everyone hummed our songs.'

'Punishing yourself won't help.'

'Peter,' she said softly, 'I'm not punishing myself. I'm performing.' She stretched her legs, and seemed bored with the conversation.

'Life has to go on, I suppose.'

'No, performing is not living. Every day I perform, but what I feel, that's something else, something only for me.'

Henshall sat down again. It had been an instinctive gesture, protective if anything, but his arms still sensed the aching fullness of the body. 'Where do you sing now?' he said awkwardly as the woman continued to stare at him.

'I have my own club, or part of it. How else could I sing? I have the wrong age, the wrong nationality, and the wrong background. I'd never keep

a job if I worked for somebody else.’ She paused.
‘And I have a protector.’

‘Imagine someone like you would.’

‘Do you? Do you now!’ She was on her feet and angry with him. ‘Don’t you understand? There’s nothing on offer. I’ve got nothing for you.’

‘I should be happy to get to know you better.’

‘You can’t.’

‘If only as a friend.’

‘That would be an unkindness to us both. You think this is Europe, where one can have a casual fling and forget about it. But here we pay with our blood. You won’t understand, but we do.’

‘Hartini, listen to me. I don’t suppose it’s wise, or unexpected, but I should like to know more about you.’

‘My friend, it is late and I’m tired. Please take the parcel.’

She opened her bag, and handed him the address. ‘Just keep that safe, and don’t write on the parcel till you’re out of the country.’

'Nothing to remember you by?'

'Please do as I say.'

'Give me your address. I'd like to think of you singing somewhere definite, even if I can't get to it.'

'You already know the place. Mapura. The Kotapalu nightclub.' She smiled at his expression. 'So I must thank you for a very pleasant evening, and bid you goodnight.' She walked to the door and waited for Henshall to open it.

'If I came back to Kotapalu, if I got a job there, would you see me?'

'Please take the parcel.'

'Why not?'

'Goodnight, my friend.' She freed herself and opened the door. For a moment she laid a hand on his shoulder as if to say more, but then turned away. Henshall watched her walk down the half-lit corridor to the stairs, the steps slowly becoming inaudible. Then he went to bed and stayed awake a long time, sensing the slight honey fragrance that

seemed comforting and then disquieting as it filled the closed room.

CHAPTER 2

Henshall booked a flight to Singapore and spent the last day sketching, restlessly drifting from place to place. He patrolled the Bali Beach Hotel, and toured the gardens, but all trace of the woman had vanished. Eventually, late in the evening, Henshall settled down to read what the woman had left. He was appalled at the blood-letting, at the thousands of bodies dumped in rivers and shallow graves throughout Java and the other islands. It was obvious why Hartini, or anyone known to harbour anti-government views, would experience difficulties,

but Henshall had no particular worries as he stood waiting early the following morning at Customs with his suitcase, sketch pad and bundles of painting gear.

The officer was a jovial man who was delighted with the sketches. He called a colleague over. 'More? You have more?' he asked, pointing to the suitcase. Henshall shook his head. 'You open please.' Henshall stood negligently by as his belongings were placed on the suitcase lid. 'This yours?' said the officer, picking up the manuscript. He untied the string and flipped through the pages, retying the parcel and motioning the porter to repack the suitcase. Henshall nodded to the man, and reached for the package, but the officer had tucked it under his arm and was now conferring with a superior. Henshall was led to a small room set out with table and chairs, where he waited half an hour. Repeatedly he walked about and stared through the window, watching as other passengers made their way to the aircraft. The last traveller boarded, and Henshall saw the hostess at the foot

of the gangplank talking to one of the airport officials. Then the door opened, and two officers came into the room.

'No you sit please,' said one in English, 'this not take long. Where you get this document?'

'It's mine', said Henshall.

'You type? Here in Indonesia you type two hundred and twenty pages in . . .' the officer flicked through Henshall's passport, 'in eight days you here in Bali? Where you get typewriter?'

'All right', said Henshall. 'I brought it into the country, to check something.'

'You show please.' He handed the manuscript over.

'The atmosphere of the place.'

'You write all this where you before?' The officer referred to the passport again. 'Singapore one day. Three days Malaysia. Peru. Our country interest you in Peru?'

Henshall began to look for another approach.

'Where you get document?' said the man again.

'I found it in the bottom of a drawer at a hotel where I was staying in Denpasar. Thought it was interesting, maybe worth publishing.'

'You steal document, and you want money making published. Is that story now?'

'Perhaps I should speak to the British Consul', said Henshall.

'Yes you speak. Sedition is serious matter.'

'I told you that I found it, and where, and there's nothing more I can add.' He stared at the officer, who stared back through dark glasses.

'Well Mr Henshall, if you choose not to cooperate then we will not detain you further', said the second officer, who had not spoken before. 'You may take your flight.' He gestured to the window.

'What about the document? Can I come back and claim it sometime?'

The voice was still amiable. 'When you have told us this is not your property? No, I don't think another visa could be issued in those circumstances.'

'And if I don't go, what happens then?'

'We investigate the matter properly, which is the correct procedure.'

'You'd keep me in detention?' Henshall frowned, and leant forward, resting his strong arms on the table.

'We would hold your passport and ask you to report to the authorities. You could travel around using the receipt.' He conferred with his colleague. 'Yes, that is possible.'

'But not leave the country?'

'Would you decide please?'

Henshall looked out of the window, to the flight that would take him away from these troubles. Stay, he thought. He could always leave afterwards, when he'd explained to Hartini.

The older man got to his feet and walked to the door, giving Henshall an amused glance before going out. Henshall took the form offered him by the first officer and wrote 'I have temporarily and voluntarily given up my passport to officer . . . ' He

looked up and wrote down the man's name and number. Then he signed it.

'That is what Bahasa says. You go to job soon?'

'In a few days.'

'Please you write company name and address here.' He pointed to the box on the other side of the form. 'Thank you. You collect receipt soon and then you free to go.'

The flight took off. Half an hour later a junior official delivered the receipt with the utmost display of courtesy, and Henshall took a taxi back to the Hotel Bali Beach. There he mooned about, sometimes on the beach, more often brooding in his room. Several times he thought of trying to contact Hartini, but he didn't have her address, or know if phones weren't tapped. In these gardens, where the hot sunshine streamed through the hibiscus and frangipani, where the friendly waiters carried beer and iced tea to the guests beneath the trees and Balinese statues, it seemed impossible there could be anything sinister in this land of smiles and warmth.

But Customs had been tipped off, and he remembered the incidents reported in the manuscript.

The following day Henshall caught his first glimpse of the island of Mapura. Two hours after leaving Jakarta, he felt the aircraft begin its descent, and looked out to see Kotapalu spread out along the thin coastal plain beneath the towering wall of the Baratung Mountains. The plane came in low, and Henshall found the place tallied with what he'd read: a nondescript relict of the Dutch colonial empire, a tangle of corrugated roofs near the port and the old commercial centre, and then an improbable orderliness of bungalows and gardens as the aircraft flew over the residential area to land at the airport north of the town. Henshall collected his luggage and was met by a Land Rover from Metax Mining, the logo prominent on the newly painted bodywork.

A boy-scoutish figure got out and introduced himself. 'Bob Woodford. Wasn't here when you came through before.' They shook hands. 'Welcome to Metax Mining.'

'Thank you', said Henshall, putting a placid face on events. The two of them walked through the crush of sellers and porters to the vehicle. 'All ship-shape and Bristol fashion now, is it?' said Henshall as he watched the last of innumerable boxes and crates being stowed aboard.

'Should hope so, or Don will want to know why. You've met Don Cullen, the new boss?'

'A Marinus van Ryssen showed me round.'

'Ah right. Marinus is back running one of the camps. Mike's at the other: Mike Posner.'

'Met him briefly', said Henshall, conjuring up the scrawny, crew-cut figure.

'Knows his business.'

Henshall laughed. 'I'm sure he does.'

'Then we have twelve Indonesian geologists, three of them rather good. The helicopter pilots are ex-Vietnam. So, with the drivers, field-hands, cooks, clerical staff, that's about fifty altogether. Plus the survey ship, in Singapore at the moment, loading up with stores and field items. Rankin's the skipper:

one of those grizzled old sea captains. You'll like him.'

'And you're the number two.'

'I am. General dogsbody. Look after public relations, like visiting the Governor, which you'll have to do this afternoon. Takes a keen interest in us.'

It was natural to like this friendly eagerness, but where the man fitted into mineral exploration, Henshall couldn't imagine. Professionals were never welcoming. They sized you up, found out where you'd been, what you'd done, and never gave anything away. But Henshall had signed on, and there was no turning back. He looked at the small houses through the cramped Land Rover windows, the bustle of brightly dressed pedestrians, the shoals of schoolchildren drifting on bicycles from side to side of the road, and decided to say nothing until the vehicle stopped in the office compound and he was taken across to meet the staff again. The secretaries remembered him, smiling warmly as they extended a hand across their typewriters. Then he went round the labyrinth of rooms that

made up the operation's headquarters, looked at the maps, inspected the assay lab, toured the vehicle workshops, and remarked finally, 'Is our boss around?'

'Won't be long', said Woodford, pausing to fling open the door to an empty office. 'Your place. Get some furniture in for you shortly.'

'That's fine,' said Henshall, 'but I think I ought to present myself.' He walked to the door marked Dr Donald Cullen: General Manager, knocked once and went in. A plump figure, balding, with thick glasses and dressed in khaki field gear, was talking earnestly into the radio. He glanced up in some irritation. 'Peter Henshall reporting', said his visitor.

'Don Cullen working. I'll have you in when it suits me. Now go away.'

Henshall went over to inspect the radio. 'Get much of a range on that?' he said.

Cullen pointed to the door.

'As you like', said Henshall, and strolled out. He folded himself into one of the visitor's chairs in the

front office, where the women got him coffee. An attractive blonde in her late thirties, neatly turned out in floral dress and high heels, sailed through the office and into Cullen's room, flashing Henshall a business-like smile as she passed. 'Sally Cullen', she said afterwards, giving him the briefest of handshakes. No prizes for guessing who runs this show, thought Henshall, seeing the brassy look and the obsequious fluster of the drivers who came running up as she stepped into the forecourt. A half-hour later Henshall was called into the manager's office, where he found Cullen in a more relaxed and confidential mood. 'Take a pew, Henshall,' he said, 'won't keep you long.'

'Peter', said his visitor.

'Be your job sometime. Requisitions. Always get the paperwork done and the rest sorts itself out.'

Henshall looked at him carefully.

'Let's get down to brass tacks. What do you know of the operation?'

Henshall outlined his understanding of the stream sampling that featured in their mineral search.

‘How do you feel about starting straight away? You’ll want to get your feet wet. Prove yourself and all that.’

‘My experience is on the record.’

‘Which is why I’ve booked you transport tomorrow.’

‘Without the usual familiarization?’

‘Sooner you’re earning your keep the happier everyone will be. Land Rover leaves at six.’

Henshall went out, bumping into Woodford, who’d been hovering near the door. ‘Everything all right?’ said the man cautiously.

‘Wouldn’t mind a talk with you sometime.’

‘Bit tied up right now.’

‘We could go down to the nightclub, supposing it’s not a glorified cathouse.’

‘Nothing like that’, said Woodford. ‘Some hostesses apparently, but they’re chaperoned.’

'Just the singer?'

'Yes, she keeps it all very proper, or so they say. I'm married myself.'

'They're not going to eat us', said Henshall. 'Try it?'

Woodford shook his head. 'No thanks. I leave all that to the younger contingent.'

There was no sign of Hartini when Henshall made his way to the club a little after ten, or anyone remotely answering to her description. An overweight Chinese woman crooned into the microphone, and there were short sketches by a stand-up comic that Henshall couldn't understand. Several women drifted in, one of them a striking Chinese in a white sequined dress slit up to the waist. But the woman simply ran a practised eye over the clientele, and disappeared. Henshall grew bored. The place didn't fill up as the evening wore on, and, though the manager came over to sit with him, Henshall found little to say, indeed could hardly make himself understood. Did he know a Hartini Sujono? Was there a beautiful singer who

performed at this club sometimes? 'You do not find this singer beautiful?' the manager asked, gesturing to the large Chinese woman who had now seated herself at the bar. He laughed uproariously, and was still smiling broadly when his guest turned to the exit.

Van Ryssen's camp was much as Henshall expected: twelve huts laid out by the river, with helicopter pad and fuel store on higher ground. The pilot, a Rick Darrell, was new to the operation and seemed to be taking its measure. Whatever their earlier acquaintance, van Ryssen now treated Henshall as junior staff, giving him a share of the work and expecting him to get on with it, which he did, easily enough after the first few days.

Henshall began sketching again, using the hour or two of light that remained after the helicopter had stopped flying for the day. Sometimes he worked by the river, and sometimes in the neighbouring *kampong*, where the villagers would often pose, but there was always Sjaripudin, one of the Indonesian geologists, who pestered him with

questions and saw no point in the work. 'A photo is just different', said Henshall one afternoon.

'Better I think', said Sjaripudin. 'More accurate.'

'I'm making something of the scene, understanding it in pictorial terms', said Henshall.

'That why you change all the time, I know.'

'Why I adjust the tones, rearrange the composition, remake the scene as the medium allows.'

'Like my map, Mr Peter.'

'I'd noticed that. From your field-sheets, *pa*'?

'Sjaripudin no need field-sheets. He see, he remember, he write on paper.'

Henshall said nothing, but waylaid van Ryssen on his way back from the shower that evening.

'How will that help?' said the man.

'Sjaripudin hasn't the faintest idea about mapping. He just makes it up.'

'One day only?'

‘To begin with. I’ll take him through the rudiments of mapping, and then look in occasionally. Keep him busy in the afternoons, anyway.’

‘While you paint, which I do not like. Camps are places of work. It does not create a professional attitude.’

‘There is nothing wrong with my work.’

Ryssen, and the subject wasn’t discussed again, neither Sjaripudin’s supervision nor those of the other geologists that Henshall gradually took under his wing. While van Ryssen got on with the paperwork, Henshall continued with his painting, stacking the work inside the hut he shared with an Indonesian geologist.

‘I have no choice’, said his boss one evening as Henshall leafed through the weekly mail packet. ‘For me it is stupid, but I have to go to this mine, this Tambang Surga.’

‘That’s clear enough’, agreed Henshall. ‘And I’d be sure to cross all the t’s, if I were you.’

‘What does that mean?’

'It means,' said the pilot, pulling the last piece of flesh off a chicken leg, 'that it's a try-on.' The men looked at each other across the Mess table. 'Your boss out to get you, or something?'

'I make my own orders', said van Ryssen, taking Cullen's memo back. 'I have been longer in exploration than to take instruction like this.'

'Suit yourself, Marinus, but if you want an off-sider, I'd be pleased to come. Do me good to get away from this routine.'

Van Ryssen shook his head. 'No you must look after the camp, which means you do not go to Kotapalu when my back is turned.'

'I have a few days' leave owing', said Henshall.

'You do not go to meet the woman in your portraits, that is what I am saying. She is in Kotapalu I think.'

Henshall was surprised. 'She works there.'

'Hartini Sujono', said van Ryssen with an odd smile. 'How do you know her?'

'Shouldn't I?'

'She is beautiful,' said van Ryssen indifferently, continuing with his meal, 'but she causes trouble. Perhaps you should not trust her.' Seeing Henshall's look, he shrugged and added, 'That is what I must tell you.'

'I was simply asking for the Land Rover.'

'Ja,' he said. 'I do not give permission, but if the Land Rover is missing for a few days I cannot know. That is best I can do.'

'Much appreciated', said Henshall. He ignored the glances between pilot and engineer, and opened another beer.

Two days after this conversation, when van Ryssen and the last load of supplies had been helicopter-ferried into Tambang Surga, Henshall set off. He left before sunrise and by lunchtime was two hundred miles on his way. He drove quietly at first, only honking at the market traders and women who obstructed the narrow streets of the villages. At a food stall outside Semarang he took a break, finishing off a large rice cookie and three pickled eggs, but was soon on the road again. For mile

after mile, along the central valley, the volcanic cones hung inverted in the reflection of *padi* fields as evening approached, but Henshall had no time for these or other thoughts. One image possessed him: Hartini laughing, Hartini strolling in that teasing way of hers. He passed men carrying paraffin lamps and wandering slowly along the road, who shrank into the shadows and stared as the vehicle hurtled past. But Henshall was in a world of his own in which the road, the trees, the fences, the huts and the odd bridge rushed out at him and which by deft gear change and brake he subdued and shot past. In a small village, however, just as he was turning a sharp corner, a small child ran out, and, in avoiding her, Henshall plunged into the side of a hut. An angry crowd of villagers collected, swarming over the Land Rover and hammering on the windows at the foreigner who sat grimly inside, ignoring a local policeman who forced his way through and blew furiously on his whistle.

CHAPTER 3

'Where did you say?' asked Cullen again.

'Sungei Tuloh', said his liaison officer. 'A village that perhaps you have not heard of. It would be eighty miles from here.'

'Never mind how far it is. What in Heaven's name was Henshall doing on that road?'

'He wasn't on the road, as it happens, but in a hut.' Iskaq looked up from the document to peer over his glasses. 'Yes, that's what the report says.'

Cullen's complexion turned purple.

'And the injured party was asleep', continued Iskaq, translating as he went along. 'It came as a most unwelcome surprise.'

Cullen could feel his eyes bulging. 'So let us start again, *Pa*' Iskaq, shall we? First Henshall was driving a Land Rover. Now he's in a hut. Which was it?'

'Well both, I imagine, Dr Cullen, or there wouldn't have been an accident, would there?'

Cullen held his temper. First there had been Sally breezing in to demand four hundred thousand rupiahs in cash for a truckload of handicrafts that were now cluttering his office. Then, for reasons best known to himself, Woodford had broken protocol and told the cook that all three of them were to have lunch in the Mess. Now there was Iskaq with some wretched police report that made no sense. Cullen slowly unfolded his arms, and said, 'This report, it's reliable, is it? Not some garbled communiqué?'

'Most assuredly not, Dr Cullen. It has been signed by the local Police Chief. A most respected figure.'

'So it's serious.'

'To run over someone who is quietly asleep in a hut in his own village in the middle of the night is not a matter to be taken lightly.'

'So that's it!' exclaimed Cullen. 'Henshall's run into a hut and injured somebody. Why in God's name couldn't you have said so straight away, *Pa* Iskaq?'

The man looked surprised. 'It is in the report', he said, laying it carefully on the table. 'Only you did not wish me to read all of it, I understood.'

'Now look,' said Cullen, 'this is bad news. Does the report say where the Land Rover is?'

'It will have been impounded', said Iskaq, picking up the document again. 'Most certainly.'

'Damn!' said Cullen. 'Another one gone. Two laid up in the workshop, and now one more is out

of service. Don't the authorities realize how difficult it is to operate in this country?'

'The authorities have their job to do', said Iskaq. 'They cannot make exceptions.'

'But how do we get it back? Some money do the trick?'

'You are considering some pecuniary inducement for the authorities to drop the matter?'

'I just want the vehicle back.'

'Which is being impounded as surety for compensation to the victim, and cost of police time. Has that not occurred to you, Dr Cullen?' Iskaq took off his glasses, and looked severely at his boss.

'I leave these matters entirely to your jurisdiction, *pa*'. I do not wish to be troubled with details.'

Iskaq sighed. 'Very well then, Dr Cullen, I should have thought that two hundred thousand rupiahs would settle the matter quite amicably.'

'Two hundred thousand? As much as that?'

'If I go in person. The family of the unfortunate villager whose leg is broken will be pleased with a

small share of that, and of course the police will be only too happy to release Mr Henshall and resume their normal duties.'

'No, *pa*'. I see no reason why Metax should bend the rules. We'll compensate the family, of course, and the Land Rover can be towed back, but Henshall can suffer the penalty of his own foolishness. Do him good. Set an example to the other hooligans on this operation. I will not have my instructions flouted in this way.'

'It does not appear to have been entirely the fault of Mr Henshall, according to the police report', said Iskaq, resuming his studious air in reading the document.

'Then they'll let him go, won't they?' said Cullen, interrupting him. 'If you can get down there today I should be most obliged. Now, if you'll excuse me, it's time for the radio scheds.'

Iskaq went out, and the matter remained in abeyance till lunchtime, when Woodford brought up the subject. 'Don't you think we should do some-

thing?' he said, after a moment's reflection. 'Can't be too pleasant for Peter down there.'

'Then perhaps he'll reflect on his folly', said Cullen. 'Rules are not made for fun. It is not wise to drive in this country, and that is why we have never applied for out-of-town licences.'

'Of course, Don, I accept that. But shouldn't we go down and show him some moral support? At least find out what trouble he's facing?'

'Iskaq is going this afternoon. No point in having a westerner blundering in.'

'Don is right, you know, Robert dear', added Sally. 'Henshall should not have been driving, no doubt about that. And van Ryssen shouldn't have given him permission to take the Land Rover. Much of the blame can be laid at the door of our Dutch friend, I'm afraid.'

'Who's off the air,' said Cullen, 'conveniently.'

'Expect he's out at that mine', said Woodford. 'He works pretty hard.'

‘Nice of you to stand up for him,’ said Sally, ‘but there are other issues. Don makes the rules, and everyone has to obey them. There can only be one chief on an operation, and that is something van Ryssen still has to learn.’

‘Of course’, said Woodford pleasantly, in a detached way. He was wondering if he liked Sally. She was great fun to be with—clear head, always decisive—but now it could be serious for van Ryssen, since no one knew what he’d said to Henshall, and this was something Iskaq wouldn’t find out. Woodford began to feel uncomfortable.

He realized the Cullens were looking at him. ‘Everything all right, Robert dear? You looked miles away.’

‘Thinking about something.’

‘Overdoing things’, decided Cullen. ‘Better take some leave shortly, old boy, before you crack up completely.’

As Cullen was accompanying Sally on a tour of local handicraft workshops, Woodford simply left a

note on his manager's desk, and threw himself into Iskaq's Land Rover when it left shortly after two.

'Get to know this beautiful country of yours better, *pa*'. Too cut off here in Kotapalu all the time.'

'Quite so, young man', said Iskaq, several rejoinders to this obvious untruth passing across his thoughts.

Though it was not a long trip, Woodford was more used to travelling to the camps by helicopter, and he found the journey extremely taxing. They rattled over ruts and potholes, across ramshackle wooden bridges, through palm-shaded villages where knots of brightly dressed women waved cheerfully, gesturing the vehicle to stop before its occupants came fully into view. Then they left the coastal plain, with its profusion of villages and flat miles of glinting *padi* field, and began climbing the Baratung Mountains proper. They plunged into long stretches of shade, the air suddenly becoming chilly and damp. The gradient steepened; the road looped in endless hairpin bends, and dizzying drops of hundreds of feet to boulder-strewn torrents

began to appear on one side and then the other of the road. They crossed cantilever bridges, the ironwork rusting but still serviceable after forty years of neglect. Incredible what the Dutch had achieved in this terrain, thought Woodford, imagining the sweat of working year after year in this hell-hole of a place, without a social life or leave or medical care.

The tropical evening was deepening when the party arrived in Sungei Tuloh. Paraffin lamps had been lit in some of the huts, and the younger generation was out together, walking and laughing on their customary evening stroll. They stared without interest as the Land Rover drew to a halt outside the police station and Iskaq went in. Woodford remained in the vehicle until the usual preliminaries were completed, and was on the point of joining Iskaq when the little man emerged, perplexed and irritated, with the police chief in attendance. 'Not here', he explained, getting into the vehicle. 'Our friend has gone, it seems.'

'Gone?' said Woodford in alarm. 'Gone where?'

'Seems he's been released.'

'That's wonderful. Thank God for that!' said Woodford. 'Aren't you pleased, *Pa*' Iskaq?'

'Yes,' said the man gloomily, 'but there's a message.' He handed Woodford an envelope on which was printed: For Messrs. Cullen & Woodford.

Woodford slit it open. 'Yes look, *pa*': Regret inconvenience caused. Rejoining operation shortly. Land Rover not badly damaged but will have it returned to Kotapalu ASAP for panel beating. Peter Henshall. PS Please check if injured villager needs hospital treatment. Have taken different route.'

Iskaq reached for the note, turned it over, and read it again. 'Rather a wasted journey', he remarked, motioning the driver to start the engine.

'At least he's safe', said Woodford. 'I am pleased.' But when the vehicle came to the edge of the village it occurred to him that they hadn't completed their mission. Badgered again, Iskaq replied, 'All right, let's see if this man hasn't mysteriously disappeared as well.' They found the injured party

easily enough, however, his leg supported by splints and wrapped in banana leaves, a sight that appalled Woodford. 'Doesn't look too good', he said to Iskaq. 'Shouldn't we take him to Kotapalu?'

'The man does not wish to go. The skin has not been broken so there's no danger of infection. These people know what they're doing, and the fracture will heal soon enough.'

'But what about compensation? Shouldn't we give him something? I mean, he'll be off work for some time.'

'That has already been taken care of', said Iskaq, getting to his feet. 'Completely taken care of.'

'Who by?' said Woodford in surprise. 'Henshall, is it?'

'In a manner of speaking', said Iskaq, indicating to the headman that the visit was over.

'I see, or, rather, I don't', said Woodford. 'Why did they decide to let Peter Henshall go?'

'Someone came from Jakarta.'

'That's unusual, isn't it? All in a few days?'

'Very', said Iskaq, now at the hut entrance. 'But perhaps we can return to Kotapalu without further delay.'

'Well, actually, I'm going to leave you here. I'd like to go on south and see the country a bit.'

Iskaq stopped. 'How, young man? You are not thinking of requisitioning this Land Rover, are you?'

'Of course not. I'll take a bus. Could you find out for me?'

For several seconds, lips tightly pursed, Iskaq stared at Woodford. Then he sent the driver away, who came back sheepishly with the information.

'There's one at ten o'clock for Semarang. It will be an uncomfortable trip.'

'Can't be helped.'

Iskaq opened his mouth, closed it, and then walked back to the Land Rover, shaking his head. The driver handed Woodford his bag, and the vehicle slowly lumbered off, its headlights catching the sides of the huts as it turned through the narrow street.

Two days passed for Woodford in a delirium of tedium, fatigue and discomfort. Continually, as he sat hunched up on his seat, surrounded by men in grey shirts who puffed quietly at thin cigarettes, by buxom woman on their way to market, by heaps of melons, baskets of vegetables and fruit, wicker-work cages of hens, and, for a time, a couple of inquisitive goats, he asked himself why he had ever thought of the idea. The view through the windows of jungle, *padi*, *kampong* and long stretches of palm trees, the sun sizzling on their shiny leaves, the blue sky with clouds, and the occasional glimpse of mountains, held his attention only for the first few hours. At each stopping point he asked the name of the village or town, but his map didn't show the smaller places, and he finally gave up calculating the length of his ordeal.

The bus did not pass van Ryssen's camp, which lay out of town, but a friendly truck-driver gave Woodford a lift, refusing payment. For the whole journey Woodford had been wondering what he

would say to van Ryssen, but found only the flight crew in camp.

'Hold your horses', said the pilot. 'We'll do a recce later.'

'I need to talk to Marinus', said Woodford.

'You can join the queue for that.'

'Someone's got to find him before the Cullens do. They're on the warpath.'

'Have a beer', said the pilot.

Though Woodford was tired after his journey, he was also impatient, and watched with annoyance as Darrell and the engineer lounged about after lunch in T-shirts and caps pulled over their faces. But then supplies were stowed aboard, and by midafternoon the helicopter was diligently searching Tambang Surga, sweeping across the jungle-clad hills as village, head-frames, adits, and tip-heaps loomed out of the vegetation and disappeared again.

'Beats me', said Darrell. 'What did that Indon say, the big guy strutting around back there?'

'Captain Mochtar, the police chief? Gone north a week ago.'

'Mean-looking guy', reflected the pilot.

'You think so?' said Woodford, but then the craft banked steeply to follow an old rail track that glinted at intervals through the trees.

Van Ryssen had heard the helicopter but was thinking of more pressing matters. Here the river meandered quietly under a screen of palms and creepers, but it wasn't friendly. Of course there are areas of the forest that are difficult for everyone, but in time you plan routes, skirt difficulties, realize the animals themselves have their haunts and rituals. Van Ryssen had long ago come to feel at home in this great breathing mass of vegetation. Sometimes it was suffocating, but with each morning came scores of brightly coloured birds flitting through the forest canopy. Gibbon colonies whooped softly, sometimes for hours on end, and monkeys would appear, swinging from branch to branch, fighting and chattering and gesticulating.

The animals of the forest floor—the tiger, elephant, deer and wild pig—never showed themselves, never interfered.

Something remained, however, something that grew more insistent with experience. At first there was nothing particular about some area, nothing tangible, but the guides approached such places with reluctance, and would never camp anywhere near. Van Ryssen began himself to know that in some places the gloom was a little thicker than elsewhere, the silence more knotted and intense. Although stories of jungle spirits were apocryphal, you avoided trouble if you could.

But there were schedules to follow. Only reluctantly had van Ryssen changed his plans, and taken the team out of the mine area. No doubt the Dutch had prospected every inch of the hinterland, and the Japanese afterwards, but there was no geochemistry then, no aerial photos. Something could have been uncovered in the rapid erosion of the last forty years, and indeed, after a long search the previous day they'd come across a small lump

of vein material in a boulder train. The search had narrowed to a small hill, and then to a wall of lode material exposed in a steep bank. The pyrite had oxidized to a rusty colour that encrusted the surface with ribbon-like swellings, but the rock underneath was hard and fresh. Van Ryssen had looked at a piece he'd hammered out. The pyrite was everywhere, but there were also threads of a warmer-coloured metal. He'd scratched with his pocket knife, and peered again. Gold. No doubt about it. Mapping and sampling and feasibility studies would come next, but this was the genuine article, the one in a thousand chance that every geologist dreams of, and for which he goes on working hopefully all his life.

So why had the atmosphere changed? Van Ryssen had ignored the feeling, directing his men to fan out and look for more showings, but they hadn't obeyed. He'd ordered a return to the river for lunch, where they were camped now, but even this respite, usually so popular, where they could open tins of corned beef and boil their rice, had not been

marked with enthusiasm. And then the worst happened. Tracks appeared: three clear pugmarks and a fainter one. For a mile they had traced their own footprints back, and over their trail were the tiger's. Where they had crossed a stream the animal had also crossed. There was no need to check further, only to think carefully.

When he'd come to Mapura, a country that hadn't seen a European for thirty years, each day had been exciting. He'd called on married staff and their families in the way usual in small-town Indonesia. He'd organized weekly cinema parties for the single staff—drivers, technicians, office staff—to which he attached himself and paid for refreshments at the interval. He chatted with Lola, the prettiest of the secretaries, and wanted to invite her out, only that wasn't possible, any more than the women he saw bathing in the rivers could be approached or spoken to. Stop the Land Rover, and they would immediately wrap themselves in their sarongs and escape into the bushes, chattering and shrieking with laughter.

Sometimes he'd pictured himself running his own company, settled with a local beauty, even if this was a dream every arriving expatriate indulged in, vaguely, without pursuing it far. But van Ryssen had pursued it, at least for a while. Off and on, he'd visited the daughter of a local businessman who had invited him back for dinner. Somehow it hadn't worked. With the whole family, for whom he'd paid, he'd at last taken Ermita to the Kotapalu nightclub, where the singer had come over and sat at their table for a few minutes, chatting politely before flashing her eyes at him. Ermita had seen the gesture, and had promptly announced she felt tired. There had been a moment afterwards in the car, when the family had gone into the house, which seemed put aside for van Ryssen, but he'd flunked it: Ermita wouldn't see him again, and then the Cullens arrived.

Van Ryssen had told his staff that Metax Mining was a western company where a Head-Office politician would come to forge links at government level. But the Cullens had changed everything,

dismissing what had been achieved in the previous months. Woodford hadn't worked in exploration before, and couldn't see the problems. Only Henshall seemed to know, and not to take the Cullens seriously, but that aloof young man took nothing seriously. It was with real annoyance that van Ryssen had been obliged to assign a whole afternoon to showing round the visitor, even though the words were pleasant enough. 'An hour would be fine, if you could spare it', Henshall had said, opening a conversation that lasted through the afternoon and late into the evening.

Van Ryssen found there was more behind the distant manner than he'd realized, even moments when he caught Henshall looking at him in good-natured amusement. Always professional, he had fallen in with Henshall's suggestion that they take dinner in town, from which they went to the nightclub, which van Ryssen hadn't visited since the Ermita debacle. 'Would it embarrass you if I took a sketch pad along?' he asked. 'I do a bit of this when I get time.' The drawings were good. Van

Ryssen was astounded at the speed by which the man drew the snub noses and sparkling expressions of the girls who came to the microphone in the local talent contest being held there that evening. Each was captured with a few strokes, their looks and defining characteristics. What would he do with the reigning singer, Hartini Sujono? wondered van Ryssen, but the woman hadn't appeared.

'So what will you do?' van Ryssen had said as they drove back to the Mess late that night. 'Will you join us?' But Henshall had only laughed, and thanked van Ryssen for a pleasant day. That was insufficient, van Ryssen thought, but he saw his visitor off just the same on the early morning flight. Now the man had returned, more for Hartini Sujono than any career advancement.

Van Ryssen's watch said three-thirty, giving them two hours of daylight. There was a single hut they'd passed a mile or two back, perched on stilts near the river, but a tiger would demolish that in a

single leap. Their previous campsite was little better, and was five or more hours' walk away, by tracks that often skirted thick foliage and undergrowth. They were better off staying put. No attack tonight, and they'd be safe for the trip. Meanwhile they had to take precautions. There were no caves in this region, van Ryssen explained, and a stockade would take too long to build, even with the chainsaw. Their best course was to build a large fire and get up an adjacent tree, a high, smooth tree, as tigers were agile, even above ground.

Van Ryssen waited. His speech had made no impression. 'Ia, Tuan Marinus. Baik-lah', had said his chief hand, but he hadn't stirred himself, any more than the others, who'd all weighed up van Ryssen with a tense, wary look. Beyond all question of face, van Ryssen had to make a plan, and carry it through.

Over the jungle canopy upstream he could see a tall hardwood that would have provided safety, but he didn't want to venture that distance alone. On the edge of the open ground where several

forest giants had fallen was what he wanted: a tree that rose straight for thirty feet before opening into an umbrella of branches. Decision made, van Ryssen got his team to arm themselves with spears cut from sharpened bamboo. That done, he walked over and began the slow task of cutting notches in the trunk, heaving himself up with the field-rope. An hour passed. The gibbons had stopped whooping, and the air was filled with an intense silence. Van Ryssen felt exposed and absurd, but there was no alternative to continuing, and when he finally gained the branches he rested a few minutes before abseiling down to collect the party.

Only the chief hand came at first, but once the fire was going and the soft gloom of evening began to fill the clearing, the other members drifted across. The chainsaw, the heavy sample bags and rucksacks were hoisted aloft, and the men themselves clambered up, away from the comforting warmth of the fire. A primus was wedged into an upper fork, and water put on to boil. Confidence returned, and there was talk of someone going

down to cut more timber. But no one volunteered, and van Ryssen couldn't insist. As tea was handed round, however, and van Ryssen reached over, he saw the mug sail upwards as a screeching howl flattened the air.

Nothing had changed, though the sound came again, closer, now punctuated by a sharp, honking cough. Even the crew couldn't believe this was a spirit, could they? The dwindling fire threw out uncertain spreads of light but nothing was moving on the ground. In bewilderment, van Ryssen turned to his chief hand, and found himself looking at a dark shape picking its way through a fallen tree some forty yards away.

Van Ryssen made as though to get up, but found himself rooted to the spot. Again he tried to call out, and heard a strange voice shouting for the facing branches to be cut off. The words were ignored, the men hugging their positions. Uncertainly, van Ryssen got to his feet, and scrambled to the branch nearest. 'Memotong disini! Cut!' he said. 'Cut here!' He drew out his *parang* and began

chopping furiously. From the corner of his eye he could see the animal as it came nearer, the stripes puckering into a frown as the whiskers parted and the tiger slowly unmeshed its teeth. 'Well, do something with that bamboo, can't you?' he shouted to the nearest hand. 'Godverdomme!' he exclaimed, and grabbed the weapon. 'Hold it like this,' he said, 'with the end anchored in the tree. Do something, for Christ's sake!' Van Ryssen was fixing the end into a fork when the spear was suddenly knocked from his grasp as the animal landed among them in the branches.