

Chapter One

Colony of German New Guinea, 1894

“This is the tropical paradise?”

Her younger brother’s alarm echoed Eva Boehm’s first impression of Herbertshöhe. The town looked to be hardly more than a shabby collection of palm-thatched shacks scattered among a few more substantial buildings, connected by tracks of crushed coral.

A sense of foreboding washed over her. *Coming here might just be the biggest mistake of my life.*

The throb of the propeller vibrated through the deck, and white foam streamed along the side as the engine went into reverse. The *Norddeutscher Lloyd* cargo steamer shuddered to a halt. As it began to go astern the anchor splashed into the translucent water, the chain roaring through the hawse-pipe.

“It’s too hot!” he whined. “And you can bet it’s lousy with mosquitoes.”

Eva sighed. The tropic sun drilled into them. Sweat trickled down to gather in damp patches wherever the high-necked blouse and long skirt touched her body. Now that the breeze of their passage had died, the humid air clung like a hot wet blanket on this lee-side of the ship. She turned her focus from the shore to the petulant expression on her brother’s narrow face.

“So what would you prefer, Helmut? The New York City winter?”

“I’d prefer something civilized and comfortable in between.”

Eva silently agreed, but replied, “You know that’s impossible. Aunt Maria and Uncle Willi are our only living relatives. We had no choice but to join them here.”

“Yes, we did! You could’ve kept your job in the saloon if you’d done what the owner wanted. You’re pretty enough to have made a good living, even in these hard times, if you’d played up to that boss!”

It took a moment for Eva to believe what she was hearing. She realized the eighteen-year-old Helmut would know of such things, but rage filled her at his suggestion that his own sister should have prostituted herself.

“Why, you nasty, foul-mouthed—”

Before she could finish, a voice spoke up behind her. “Ah, *Fräulein* Boehm. And what do you think of your home-to-be?”

Eva turned to see the genial, bewhiskered face of Captain Frankl. Flustered, she pulled herself together, wondering how long he’d been standing there. Fortunately, the captain didn’t speak English, so her exchange with Helmut should have passed him by.

“It is a little early to tell, captain,” she said in slow, careful German. Although her parents had often used it at home, Eva had almost forgotten their mother-tongue until compelled to practice it on the voyage. “It’s certainly very different to New York. At least it’ll be pleasant to stand on solid ground again.”

“But you have been a good sailor, my dear. Unlike some we could mention, *hein?*” Helmut pulled a face at the implied criticism.

“However, I must be about the business of my ship. We will lower the longboat soon, then we can all go ashore. I will be busy, so I’ll take this opportunity to wish you farewell and good fortune, *Fräulein* Boehm, Helmut.” The captain bowed, clicking his heels.

“Thank you, captain. And good fortune to you, too.”

The moment he moved out of earshot Eva rounded on her brother. Helmut, she saw by his expression, was frightened by her unaccustomed anger.

“Sorry, Sis. I guess I spoke out of turn.” He assumed a martyred expression. “Being sick so much puts me in a bad temper, you know. I’ll be better once we’re ashore, I promise.”

“Humph!” Eva turned her attention back to the shore. As someone who was almost never ill, she couldn’t help feeling that Helmut only needed to decide he’d prefer to be healthy, and the wish would become reality. She held their mother responsible for always mollicoddling her only son, her favorite. Especially as she remembered once overhearing her father say: *Poor Helmut. He enjoys bad health.*

The longboat splashed into the water at the foot of the boarding ladder. Sailors carried their meager luggage down, and Eva and Helmut followed the captain and officers. They were the sole passengers, apart from two middle-aged men traveling from Germany to take up administrative positions in the *Neu Guinea Kompagnie*. This pair had spent most of the long voyage at the bar.

As she stepped into the rocking boat and her hand released the ladder rail, a sudden premonition gripped her that she had just lost her hold on civilization, and was about to be catapulted into an unknown, barbarous future over which she’d have little control. She took a deep breath, readying herself to face the unexpected.

The ship rode at anchor about half a mile offshore. Once they left the shelter of the ship, the longboat began to pitch and toss. She clung to the seat to steady herself. At least the wind blew from astern, otherwise they would arrive drenched in spray.

The shore gained definition and color as they approached. To her amazement, the beach was black sand, emphasizing the brilliance of the vegetation above — red, yellow and green crotons, bright yellow and cream frangipani, and great green coconuts suspended high in the rustling fronds of the palms, looking ready to dash out the brains of anyone foolish enough to doze off against a palm-trunk.

The boat threaded a passage through the fringing reef. A multicolored flash of coral off to their left broke the surface in the trough of a wave, then the sea calmed as the surf spent its force on the reef. A few more sweeps of the oars and the longboat bumped against a timber jetty jutting out through the shallows from the shore.

Smells familiar from their stopover in Samoa struck Eva’s nostrils as she climbed up the steps from the landing stage to the main deck. The sharp iodine of seaweed, fragrant frangipani blossoms, the sour smell from piles of copra stacked on the wharf, and the whole riot of damp tropical lushness.

She paused at the top of the steps to find herself the focus of all eyes. Blue, green, or brown eyes in white faces, emphasizing her position as the only European woman in sight; dark brown in brown faces, merely curious.

The intensity of the stares made her feel naked, even somehow soiled. She wondered

which of those measuring, deprived eyes belonged to Uncle Willi. She had never seen a picture of him. Then a grand but totally bizarre sight caught her attention.

An elegant four-wheeled landau, drawn by a beautiful matched pair of dappled grays, stood a little apart from the crowd. But it wasn't the splendid equipage so much as the occupants that drew her eyes.

The driver sat his high seat like an ebony statue, dressed in a lace-trimmed ivory silk footman's suit and tricorne hat, an ensemble that wouldn't have been out of place at the court of Louis XIV. The bird of paradise plumes adorning that hat, however, would have made even the Sun King green with envy. The skin of his face and hands, by contrast, was so black as to show bluish highlights where the sun glanced off it.

Behind him sat a bevy of pretty little brown native girls, dressed in fussy frills and furbelows, accompanying a stately lady wearing a simply styled golden silk dress that set off her smooth milk-coffee-colored skin. She reclined on satin cushions in the shade of a large parasol held by one of her small attendants. As Eva watched, she smiled graciously at Captain Frankl who had hastened to greet her, bowing and kissing her hand with a courtly flourish.

This personage could only be Emma Eliza Forsayth, known to the Germans as *Die Königin der Südsee*, Queen Emma of the South Seas.

Captain Frankl had often spoken of her on the long voyage out, with a curious mixture of deference and innuendo. She had been born in Samoa to the United States commercial agent and a daughter of a high Samoan chief, and had blazed a glorious trail over the far-flung islands of the South Pacific.

She had been here before the Germans annexed Neu Pommern, or New Britain, as it was then known. The German Navy arrived to find Queen Emma ensconced in a great house on her plantation, ready to welcome the imperial sailors with champagne, parties and the bewitching presence of her many Samoan-American sisters and nieces.

She may have had a penchant for champagne and dashing young men, Captain Frankl had confided, but as well as having wealth, wit, beauty and a delightful touch on the piano, the charming widow Emma Forsayth also possessed the keenest business sense in the South Seas.

Perhaps Eva was staring. In any case, Queen Emma looked up. Her large, liquid eyes, full of interest and intelligence, focused on her. She addressed a quick question to Captain Frankl, but at that moment a man detached himself from the crowd to claim Eva's attention.

"Eva! Helmut! My dear children, I am your Uncle Willi. Welcome to our tropical paradise."

Children stretched the point. Eva knew Willi was thirty-five, only fifteen years older than herself. Aunt Maria was much younger than her mother had been.

The man in front of her was short and overweight, dressed in a white linen tropical suit, his face bright and shining pink from the heat. He raised his straw hat to reveal thinning pale blond hair sweat-plastered to his scalp. He rushed into speech, not giving either of them time to reply.

"Is this all your luggage?" Willi snapped his fingers, and a group of natives sprang forward to pick up their belongings. "Come, come! We must hurry, no time to introduce you around, the ship was unfortunately late and we have far to go to the plantation. We must not be benighted at sea. No channel marker-lights here. Primitive, you know."

Willi finished this speech with an incongruous giggle, before urging them past the bank of curious eyes toward a steam launch tied up at the side of the jetty. Their bags were already loaded, and as soon as they stepped on board, the native crew let go the moorings, the driver opened a steam-valve and the boat chuffed away from the wharf.

“Let me introduce you to your new home. This is Blanche Bay. That volcano to the north-west is Matupi,” Uncle Willi babbled on. “The first German trading station was at its foot. Now it is a coaling station for the ships. That other little volcano is Vulcan. They say it just popped up out of the sea about twenty years ago, but since then it’s been quiet, although we do get a lot of earthquakes. Nothing to worry about; shaking is all that happens. The ground will not open up and swallow you.

“Our plantation is right on the coast, on a little point of land, seven kilometers from Herbertshöhe...”

As he stood close beside them, pointing out the sights, Eva discovered that Uncle Willi smelled. Badly. Of course, everyone perspired heavily in the tropics, but Willi was apparently one of those unfortunate people who smelt *really* bad. She edged away, taking shallow breaths through her mouth.

“And how is Aunt Maria, Uncle Willi?”

The flow of chatter stopped. A blank expression crossed Willi’s face before it set in doleful lines.

“I’m afraid, my dear, that your aunt has ... passed away.” Willi sniffed, and mopped his face with a large white handkerchief. “There was not time to let you know before you left.”

It was as if a chasm had opened under her feet. Her last blood relative, apart from Helmut, of course. Gone, like the others, after she had traveled more than halfway around the world to be with her! She clasped the boat’s frail pipe-railing, gazing blankly at the water rushing by and tensed all her muscles for a moment, seeking strength to face this latest disaster.

“When — when did she die?” Eva asked, once she had control of herself again.

“Blackwater fever,” Willi replied, seeming to misunderstand her question over the sudden hiss of escaping steam as the driver opened the pressure valve of the engine. The boat slowed.

“A terrible thing. Not many survive it. It is the one snake in our paradise, the tropical diseases.” He brightened. “But no more of this morbid talk. See, we have arrived.”

Eva glanced at the shore. They’d been running outside the coral reef, which paralleled the beach in a continuous barrier. At first she saw no difference in the view, but then the boat’s bow turned to line up on the space between a double row of stakes. As they slowed and approached, she saw they marked a narrow passage blasted through the reef. A ramshackle boatshed, constructed of poles driven into the sand and supporting a palm-thatched roof, extended out from the beach. The torrent of new impressions forced her dismal thoughts at the shock of her aunt’s death to the back of her mind.

The launch stopped with a final belch of steam. The crew grasped the shed’s poles and manhandled the boat stern-first into the shelter. They disembarked on a small platform on the shore at deck-level. Willi led them along a boardwalk over the black sand to where rows of coconut palms marched off in a diminishing perspective over the coastal plain.

A path of crushed white coral wound between the tall slim trunks. Sweating brown men were busily slashing back the undergrowth under the palms, supervised by a blue-black man, who looked to be of the same race as Queen Emma’s driver. He chivvied them out of the way

as they paused to stare at the new arrivals, then turned to stare after them himself.

“What are those black men, Uncle Willi?” Helmut asked.

“Bukas, from the Solomon Islands. They help us keep the Tolais — they’re the locals — in line. Bukas and Tolais are hereditary enemies, so the Bukas make good bodyguards and overseers.”

Eva’s democratic instincts rebelled at this example of the old colonial divide-and-rule. She kept silent, however, glancing uneasily at the tools the Tolais held. They were like a crude saber blade, a strip of steel about four to five feet long, sharpened along one edge, with a piece of cloth bound around the end to form a handle. She wondered what the locals thought of their colonial masters, and whether they ever felt the temptation to use those wicked slashers on white-skinned flesh.

The plantation house came in sight, a rambling shingle-roofed bungalow, constructed in massive unpainted timber that looked like teak. It was set on a slight rise to catch the sea breeze, raised off the ground on coral blocks to allow free passage of air. Wide latticed verandahs all around shaded the walls.

Eva’s spirits lifted. Life could be pleasant enough here. It would depend on finding some useful occupation, and on what Willi’s conception of her role might be. She had expected to have to defer to Aunt Maria in household matters; not exactly a thrilling prospect for one who’d been the de facto head of her own household since her mother’s death. To be dependent on Willi alone, however, could well be worse.

How much worse, time would tell. If only Willi didn’t smell so bad.

Perhaps one got used to it. Aunt Maria must have been able to cope.

MARIA URSULA LUCKNER
GELIEBT FRAU DER WILHELM CARL LUCKNER
1861 - 189—

A sliver had broken off the simple wooden cross, carrying with it the last numeral. In the time since her arrival, Eva had taken to laying fresh flowers each day on the grave she found at the bottom of the garden.

She wondered what her Aunt Maria had been like. Her mother had rarely mentioned her younger sister; it seemed they had not got on well together.

Eva hadn’t seen Willi visit the grave, but now sensed his presence behind her. His smell was as noticeable as ever, even out here in the open. She hadn’t grown used to it, although she knew he did bathe regularly, so perhaps it was just something physically incompatible between them.

“It is good of you to do this, Eva,” Willi said, looking down on her as she tidied the flowers in their vase.

“She was my mother’s sister, after all, even though I never knew her. And, you must admit, I have very little to occupy me.” She couldn’t keep a tart note out of her voice.

Willi looked flustered, as he often did when Eva made a direct observation, but made no comment.

“I have ordered a proper marble headstone to be sent out from home.” He touched the spot

where the last numeral had been. “See, this is rotting already. Wood does not last in this climate.” He gave his annoying high-pitched giggle.

Eva stood, dusting off the front of her skirt. With Willi’s proximity, it was suddenly hot and close in the garden. “I’m going for a walk along the beach.”

“I’ll go with you—”

“No, Uncle Willi. You have a plantation to run, and besides, I’d like to be alone for a while.”

“Then I will send Opek to escort you.”

“There’s no need.”

“There is every need. You seem to forget, Eva, these people were cannibals until very recently. Up in the hills, quite close by, they still practice it. Wait here until Opek comes.”

Rebelliously, Eva turned and strode off toward the beach as soon as Willi was out of sight. Maybe meeting a hungry cannibal would provide an interesting contrast to the stultifying boredom of the past week.

She had not gone far before she heard Opek panting up behind her. As soon as he had her in sight, the big Buka overseer slowed his pace to hers, keeping about fifty yards behind as she walked along the beach.

Eva had worried needlessly about her role in the household. It seemed she had none. Opek ordered the duties of the numerous Tolai house-servants without any help from her. She’d also worried about Helmut’s likely behavior, but he and Willi got on very well. Her brother reveled in his position of power as an overseer on the plantation. Her only pastimes were to practice her flute and lounge in a hammock on the verandah, reading a book from Willi’s limited library. Soon she’d finish the last one, and what then?

She smiled bitterly to herself, recalling her dreams of making a useful life here: teaching music and English to children, and perhaps meeting a nice young man. One who, with the shortage of women in the colony, would overlook the disadvantages of marrying a poor foreign orphan.

Instead, a lifetime of boredom, heat and discomfort stretched before her. She hadn’t seen a single child since her arrival, let alone an eligible man. The plantation was quite isolated, but surely Willi or one of the servants must make shopping trips to town now and then? She could accompany them, and take the opportunity to look for some employment.

Willi had been no help. “A lady such as you has no need to work, Eva,” was all he’d said when she’d broached the subject. It hadn’t seemed a favorable time to tell him she wished to get away and make a life of her own, now Helmut was settled and no longer her responsibility.

Only two people had visited during the long week; a dour, middle-aged couple named Baumgarten. They had sat out on the verandah on the shady side of the house, sipping tea from tiny porcelain cups and casting covert glances at Eva, as Herr Baumgarten carried on a desultory conversation with Willi on the subject of copra prices. His wife seemed to have no conversation at all. At length, Baumgarten turned to Eva and bared his teeth in a condescending smile.

“And what do you think of our little society, *Fräulein Boehm*?”

“I haven’t experienced anything that could be called society, *Herr Baumgarten*, so I haven’t had the opportunity to form an opinion,” she said, annoyed at being ignored for the

best part of half an hour. “Although I’ve heard that Mrs. Forsayth is well worth a visit.”

The breath hissed through Baumgarten’s long yellow teeth.

“We won’t be visiting *that* woman, Eva,” Willi said.

“Why ever not? Captain Frankl told me she’s quite the most hospitable and interesting personality in the entire colony.”

“She has scandalized every decent person on the island!” *Frau* Baumgarten blurted.

“How?”

But *Frau* Baumgarten seemed abashed at her own temerity in speaking at all. Willi made an answer.

“Mrs. Forsayth is now *Frau* Kolbe, Eva. She married again recently, and her new husband has quarreled with the administrator—”

“He *horsewhipped* Herr Schmiele, when he quite rightly took him to task for marrying a half-caste without his permission!” Baumgarten interrupted.

“Paul Kolbe is some fifteen years her junior—”

“Imagine! He is a lieutenant in the reserve of the Schleswigsche Field Artillery. A Prussian officer, marrying a — a *Creole!*”

Eva tried without success to hide a smile. The new consort sounded almost as interesting as Queen Emma herself.

“Perhaps he was trying to better himself,” she remarked lightly. “I hear Queen Emma is fabulously rich.”

A stunned silence ensued. *Frau* Baumgarten buried her nose in her empty teacup. Her husband found his voice at last to declare they had better be going. Ignoring Willi’s polite protests, he went to the verandah rail and called his driver.

“You are not like a good German girl at all, Eva,” Willi chided her as soon as the Baumgartens’ buggy had left.

“That’s not surprising, Uncle Willi. I’m American.”

“But your blood is German!”

“And I was born in New York. I consider myself fully American. Anyway, how is a German girl supposed to behave?”

“She does not express opinions contrary to those of her guardian or his guests.”

“*What* did you say?”

He went on as if she hadn’t spoken. “In fact, she doesn’t offer an opinion at all unless asked, and then is careful not to give offense in her reply.” He shook his head. “And you looked so sweet and demure in that family photograph you sent me — us.”

“Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you, Uncle Willi, but an educated American girl is expected to hold up her end of the conversation in any company. *That* is considered good manners where I come from!”

They’d had many such minor disagreements. Willi seemed to want something from her, but whenever he appeared about to make some revelation, he would stop and give that maddening giggle. He seemed to be nervous of her, or of something.

She had now come about a mile from the house. Eva turned and walked back, lifting her white linen skirt to paddle her bare feet in the warm water. Opek retired up the beach until she passed him, then fell in step again behind her. His presence should have been reassuring, but Eva couldn’t help feeling like a prisoner in an exercise yard, with Opek as warder.

The walk had done her good. She felt her energy rising, almost to its original level. Over the past weeks the heat and humidity had reduced her to a state of torpor, but now she must be getting acclimatized. Time for action.

I won't wait for a shopping trip. I'll ask Willi if the launch could take me to town tomorrow. I must look for a job.

Surely there would be one, with so few Europeans in the colony? And she could start meeting people...

She returned to a silent house. Willi was nowhere in sight. Several hours remained to fill in before dinner. She went down the hall to get her book from her room.

Helmut's bedroom door opened.

Eva had grown used to the near-nakedness of the natives. Both sexes wore nothing but a length of cloth, called a lap-lap, wound around their waist. But the little housemaid was stark naked, her lap-lap bunched up in her hand. Judging by the small pointed breasts, narrow hips and scant pubic hair, she could have been little more than fourteen years old.

The girl jumped at the sight of Eva, then her face went blank. Eva seized her arm above the elbow as she made to brush past. A rank farmyard smell assailed her nostrils.

"What do you think you're doing?" Eva demanded.

The girl gave her a swift glance out of the corners of her sloe eyes. "Me no savvy," she said insolently, twisted the firm, sweat-slicked arm out of Eva's grip, and dashed off down the hall.

Eva took a deep breath and stepped up to Helmut's open door. He, too, was naked, lying back on the rumpled bed with a smirk on his face.

"Cover yourself, you — you *reprobate!*" she snarled.

"Why? Does the sight of a naked man bother you, Sis?" Helmut put his hands behind his head and raised his eyebrows.

Controlling her temper with difficulty, Eva kept her gaze on his face and shot back, "It takes more than what you've been doing to make a man out of a nasty little boy. And that girl is even more of a child than you are. Does Willi know you're debauching the servants?"

"Debauching? What a big word to use over nothing! It's not the first time that little slut has—"

"That's no excuse! What you're doing is the very worst kind of exploitation, taking advantage of an ignorant child!" Eva's voice became shrill at her inability to shame him.

"Willi knows that's all she's good for. He doesn't mind." He rolled over on his side toward her, propped his head up on his fist and gave Eva a superior smile.

"You should marry Willi, Sis. He'd like that, and if you had him and some babies to keep you busy, you wouldn't be bored. You wouldn't come sticking your nose in where it's not wanted."

Eva's jaw dropped, and Helmut pressed his advantage. "In fact, it's your *duty* to marry Willi. That would secure our place here."

A red tide suffused her mind. "Serves you right if you catch something nasty from that little brat!" she yelled, slammed the door on him and fled down the hall to her room.

Helmut lay back on the bed, still smiling. He didn't often win a verbal joust with his sister. Her final barb didn't bother him; the threat of disease was *his* weapon, not hers.

In spite of the heat of the afternoon and his recent exertions, Helmut shivered, and felt a sort of prickling in his legs. Frowning, he put the back of his hand to his forehead. The skin was dry and hot, but a chill continued to make him shiver. He lay back and pulled the sheet over himself. After a minute, he added a blanket.

This must be what it feels like after sex. I might as well take the rest of the afternoon off.

"Boys will be boys," Willi said evasively, when Eva confronted him over his evening schnapps on the verandah. "Of course, it is difficult for you, Eva, to be faced with this situation that must seem so sordid to a gently reared girl like yourself. But a man's desires are sometimes difficult to suppress..."

She saw his eyes run over her body, lingering on the breasts that her angry straight-backed stance made prominent. Willi's voice became guttural as he made a move to rise.

"In fact, I've been meaning to speak to you about that. I find my own desires..."

Eva jumped a step backward. "He hasn't come out, and dinner is ready. Perhaps he's ashamed after all," she babbled. "I'll go see." Avoiding Willi's outstretched hand, she hurried inside.

In the darkness of the hall, she paused to collect herself. She knew now what Willi wanted from her. In fact, she'd probably known it all along, but had refused to admit it consciously.

A void opened in her stomach, triggered by a sense of being trapped. She shuddered at the idea of Willi touching her, sharing her bed. She *must* find a way to discourage him.

It's impossible to stay on here now. I must get to town tomorrow; talk to the administrator, see if he can suggest some job and lodgings for me...

A strange chattering sound from Helmut's room broke in on her planning. She pushed the door open, to find it in darkness. Groping around on the bedside table she found a box of matches and struck a light to the kerosene lamp.

Helmut lay huddled under three blankets, curled up in the fetal position. Eyes closed, face bluish, his teeth chattering as if he was freezing to death. Eva put the back of her hand on his forehead. It was dry and burning hot.

HELMUT IGNATIUS BOEHM

1876 – 1894

Helmut had always hated his middle name, Eva knew, now here it was, displayed for all to see. And it would last, as she had been assured.

"Kwila wood," the carpenter had said, offering rough comfort. "So strong and dense, it won't even float in water. It will last forever, *Fräulein*."

He'd come from Herbertshöhe to fashion the cross, along with the missionary, the doctor, Administrator Schmiele, the Baumgartens and some others to attend the funeral.

Schmiele proved to be a fussy, humorless bureaucrat. Eva could well imagine a man of

spirit and little patience taking a horsewhip to him, and now she'd met him, despaired of his giving her any sympathetic hearing. Willi had stayed by Schmiele's side throughout, frustrating any attempt she might make to talk to the administrator privately. He was now seeing the visitors off on the steam launch.

"Malignant malaria," the doctor had pronounced, when called on the morning after Helmut took ill. "It is safe to nurse him, *Fräulein*. We don't know how it spreads, but it is not contagious."

That had at least quelled Eva's irrational fear that she had somehow placed a curse on her brother, suggesting he could catch a disease from the native girl. Contagious it may not have been, but it killed Helmut in just three days.

She remained kneeling alone at the graveside. Two crosses now, side by side. Would Willi order another headstone from Germany for Helmut? She certainly couldn't afford it.

Guiltily, Eva accepted that her sorrow was less for Helmut than for herself, now left with no close relative in the whole world. Her petulant, selfish brother had been difficult to love, with his constant demands for her devotion while giving nothing in return.

But still she cried for him. He *had* been her brother, after all. Her last link, except for the flute, with home and her beloved father. Whatever could she do now?

She stared blindly at the cross.

Then frowned.

Kwila wood. It will last forever...

Why did her mind keep coming back to the carpenter's remark? It tantalized her, this feeling that it held some significance just out of her reach.

Her thoughts switched to the night before Helmut had died; when, sitting at his bedside, she re-read Aunt Maria's letter.

And the climate will be so good for dear Helmut, if, as you say, he is inclined to be consumptive...

The "so good" climate had killed him. But something else about the letter seemed important, in the same way as did the carpenter's remark.

Eva wiped her tears. She looked at the two crosses. They were identical; fashioned by the same hand, out of apparently the same durable wood. But the numeral had rotted off...

She had never looked closely at the cross on Aunt Maria's grave. She ran her fingernail over where the numeral had been.

The surface under her touch was iron-hard, smooth, as if struck by a chisel.

She heard Willi's step behind her, and it all fell into place. Those account books Willi had left open on the dining table that she had tidied away the other day. The same handwriting...

With her eyes still fixed on the defaced cross, Eva said, "You tricked us into coming here, didn't you? *You* wrote the letter. Aunt Maria was already dead."

Willi gave that infuriating nervous giggle. "Eva, my dear, you are upset, that is natural. The funeral..." He paused as she rose, hands clasped behind her, and gazed at him with an air of certainty.

"Why did you do it, Willi?"

Her uncle seemed to shed a skin, or a mask. His nervous, prevaricating air vanished. He smiled and stood straighter.

"Why? I found myself unexpectedly a widower, my dear. Your letter came like a gift from

providence, with that charming family photograph you enclosed. I fell in love with that picture of you.”

“What nonsense! People don’t just fall in love with a picture, without knowing anything about the personality!”

“Yes, I admit I was disappointed when I found you so stubborn and opinionated. But you will learn to show the proper respect due a husband, once you come around to seeing which way your duty lies.”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing! I have no intention of marrying!”

“You will, Eva.” He smirked. “You have no other choice.”

“I may be destitute, but I’m not helpless! The US consul—”

“He died of blackwater fever in 1891, and hasn’t been replaced.”

“Then I will go to Administrator Schmiele. He, perhaps, will be gentleman enough to assist me!”

Willi shrugged. “Perhaps. But there is the matter of getting to see him. I have instructed my Bukas not to let you set foot on the launch, and I’ve told everyone you are too upset to receive visitors until further notice.”

“Then I’ll walk!”

He giggled. Not the old nervous giggle. This one was derisive. “That would be a particularly nasty way of committing suicide, my dear. The cannibals would be delighted to see you strolling through their domain. And I’m sure they would have other uses for your live, succulent body before they ate you.”

He licked his thick lips suggestively, then slapped the riding crop, which he always carried to encourage the workers, into his palm and snapped, “But enough of this argument! You *will* marry me. Everyone expects it. I will not be made to look a fool!”

As Eva stared, a strange, almost deranged look came into Willi’s eyes. He went on in a voice edged with fanaticism.

“This is the dawn of a new imperial age in the South Seas. Think, Eva! A man could be a prince here. A king, even! If a Samoan Creole like Emma Kolbe can do it, why can’t I?”

Eva could only stare at him as he warmed to his theme.

“The Marquis de Rais tried. He wanted to be King Charles the First of Oceania, but the fool picked the worst possible place on Neu Mecklenberg for his colony. Of course it failed. But Neu Mecklenberg could be a paradise. The company hasn’t taken it over yet. It could be a kingdom, just waiting for someone’s hand to take it. Why shouldn’t that hand be mine?”

Eva struggled to regain her poise. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. But if you want so much to be a king, Willi, why not marry one of Queen Emma’s nieces, and unite your fortunes?”

“A king needs heirs. And they must be of good German blood. I will not have Creole children, to be looked down on by some long-nosed Prussian *Junker*. No, Eva. *You* must bear my heirs. I knew my dreams would come true when your letter arrived. That photograph was a sign from God.”

“I’ll never marry you. You’re mad, Willi,” she whispered. “Gone troppo, isn’t that what they call it? The heat, the drink and the loneliness—”

“Lonely no more, my dear. You will marry me, willingly or not.” He moved forward menacingly and tapped her on the bottom with the riding crop. Willi no longer appeared to

her as a fool. A madman, perhaps, but not a clown. An eager, cruel expression lit up his pale eyes.

“Go to your room. Sleep on it. I’ll come up in the morning to see if you need more ... persuasion.”

The tapping on her bottom became harder, stinging. All Eva’s grief and uncertainty vanished in a flash of rage. She lifted her hand to strike him, only to have her wrist seized from behind. With a startled cry, she twisted around to find Opek holding her in an unbreakable grip. He looked at her, his expression eager. At a command from Willi he dragged her to the garden gate and thrust her through.

“Do what boss say,” he growled, with a leer. Eva hesitated; then, understanding this was neither the time nor place for defiance, turned and walked off with what dignity she could muster.

“Remember, Eva, I won’t take no for an answer,” Willi called after her. “You *will* marry me, or there’ll be *three* crosses here in the garden!”

Helmut’s canvas trousers fitted her quite well. Just a little tight across the hips and bottom, and she had to cinch one of her belts in to take up the slack around her slim waist, but the length was good. Helmut had been a little taller, but her legs were longer.

I don’t want heavy skirts tripping me up if I have to run from a cannibal.

Willi had retired an hour ago, and the servants had long since finished up and gone to their huts.

It would be foolish to carry a bag. Eva had taken the bare necessities from Helmut’s and her own wardrobe, rolled them up in a blanket and fastened two of Helmut’s belts around the roll near either end. A strap between the belts enabled her to sling the thick sausage over her back. Her precious flute in its case hung by another strap around her neck. Thus able to move with her hands free, she stole out into the hall.

It was almost pitch-dark. Only the faintest loom of light from outside showed the position of the verandah doors, open to let in the cool night air but covered in gratings to keep out a possible revolt of the workers. Fortunately, she knew where the key was hidden. Testing each step for creaking boards, Eva crept across the verandah, unlocked the grating, eased it back and tiptoed down the front steps.

A crescent moon gave little enough light to see by, but the whiteness of the crushed coral path stood out sufficiently well to guide her to the boatshed. She walked beside the path, on the soft ground, where no crunch of footsteps would give her away.

Eva wished she had taken more notice of the workings of the steam launch. If she couldn’t get it going she’d walk along the beach, taking her chances on a prowling cannibal. Logic told her they would go to bed with the sunset. She hoped cannibals were logical, and struggled to suppress her fears. *I escaped from a whole bunch of thugs in New York. Surely I can do it again!*

She planned to get to Queen Emma’s house at Ralum. As a woman and a fellow American, perhaps Emma Kolbe might be more sympathetic to her tale of woe than would Administrator Schmiele.

She could also trade on their common interest in music. Not only was Emma a gifted pianist, but her brother-in-law Richard Parkinson was said to be an accomplished violinist. A picture formed in Eva's mind of them playing trios together, becoming firm friends over music and champagne. Perhaps she could beg a ride on one of Queen Emma's ships to Australia and try for a new life there.

She stepped aboard the steam launch, dropped her bundles on the side bench seat and went to inspect the engine. The boiler was still warm from delivering the mourners back to Herbertshöhe. Eva opened the firebox door to find a faint glow from the coals. Her spirits lifted. She need only add kindling—

An arm wrapped around her waist with fearsome strength, crushing the breath out of her. A big hand covered her mouth, stifling her scream. As she began to struggle the arm slid up, and its hand clamped on her breast.

Her assailant was much taller than Willi or any of the Bukas or plantation workers. Did their diet do this to cannibals?

Oh God! A cannibal!

I should have listened to Willi.

That was Eva's last coherent thought, before terror at her impending fate swamped her mind.

Chapter Two

“Blimey! You're a woman!”

The words didn't register through Eva's terror. Coming out of her paralysis, she began struggling frantically to get free.

The fierce grasp on her breast eased and slipped down to her waist. Then, as she jackknifed forward and tried to twist out of his grasp, his hand shot up and clamped there again, pressing her against his chest. Her captor bent to murmur in her ear, “I mean you no harm, *Fräulein*. Please! Stop fighting me or you'll hurt yourself.”

It dawned on Eva that a cannibal would be extremely unlikely to wear what felt like a shirt and trousers, let alone speak perfect English. Her mind had become attuned to German. She understood what he was saying at last, stopped struggling and lay still against his broad chest.

“That's better. Do you understand English?” Hope surged in his voice, where before it had held the resigned air of one who didn't expect to be understood. Eva nodded under his hand.

“What luck!” He paused, and she could almost feel him thinking. To her horror her nipple hardened of its own volition as he absently caressed her breast, but the hand over her mouth remained firm.

“Look,” he said at last, “I don't mean to hurt you, honest. I thought you were a man, you see, and that you were going to take the boat out. I just want to borrow it for a while. That's if you don't mind.”

If I don't mind! Eva fought down a hysterical giggle. This incongruous politeness calmed her, however. Her fear subsided.

The mystery man waited as if for a reply, then added, "We can't carry on this one-sided conversation. If I take my hand away, do you promise not to scream?"

Eva nodded, as much as the hand over her mouth allowed. She certainly had no wish for help from Willi. It was difficult to think straight with that other audacious hand holding her breast, but the stranger's voice appealed to her musical ear. He would sing a good bass line if he could carry a tune, came the inconsequential thought.

The hand left her mouth. Eva gulped in a breath to steady the indignation that had replaced her fear, then hissed, "You're absolutely and completely certain now, are you, that I'm a woman?"

"Oh! Yes, sorry." He released her breast. "I didn't mean to mistreat your person."

A smothered chuckle belied the apology. She gritted her teeth. His pleasant voice carried only too well on the still night air.

He turned her around, keeping a light grip on her shoulders. She felt a gentle tugging on her scalp. His prickly whiskers had caught in her hair, teasing out a strand that joined them like a gossamer skein in the faint moonlight.

Eva couldn't make out anything of his features in the gloom under the boatshed roof. He was just a big, solid shadow. She swept her hair back and whispered a response to his belated apology.

"You could've fooled me. Who are you, anyway?"

"Hugo Mortimer," he whispered back. "And who are you?"

"Eva Boehm."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Boehm. Why are we whispering?"

"Because I don't want anyone to hear us. Where did you spring from, and why do you want to borrow the boat?"

"Why don't you want us to be overheard?"

"Can't you *please* just accept that it's necessary?" Eva whispered furiously. "Let's get *out* of here, now, before someone comes! Do you know how to work this thing?"

"Oh, sure." He bent to run his hands over the controls, invisible in the darkness. "It's just your standard steam engine."

"HANDEN HOCH!"

Eva gave a muffled scream, spinning around to see Willi standing on the path, pointing a huge revolver at Hugo Mortimer.

"He seems a good enough reason for *me* to whisper, but I'd be interested to hear yours," Mortimer addressed her, ignoring Willi. "And I don't need to know German to guess that means 'hands up'."

He raised his hands level with his shoulders, turning casually to face the menacing revolver. Eva wondered whether his response showed coolness or stupidity.

"Eva, what are you doing here? Who is this person?" Willi demanded.

"I heard a noise at the boatshed and came to investigate." Willi gave her a look of disbelief, his eyebrows rising as he took in her clothes, the white shirt and buff-colored trousers standing out in the darkness.

"Why are you wearing Helmut's trousers?" Not waiting for an answer he went on, "Come

away from that man. Tell him to go in front of us up to the house.” He gestured with the barrel.

Eva decided to take a chance that the stranger’s casual response meant self-assurance.

“Grab his gun when I knock his arm down,” she said in an undertone to Hugo Mortimer, then moved as if to meekly go past Willi. Thank God he didn’t understand English. As she drew level she flung herself down on his arm, praying Mortimer was a quick thinker.

Coolness after all, she decided, and also a fast mover. The revolver seemed to transfer with blinding speed from Willi’s hand to Mortimer’s, the barrel grinding into the crease between its former owner’s double chins. Mortimer steadied Eva with an arm around her waist as Willi snatched away the arm she was forcing down.

“I don’t know what this is all about, Miss Boehm, but thanks for that.” He neglected to release her. Eva, shaken by the speed of events, was content to stay at his side, her shoulder nestling snug under his armpit. She found something reassuring in his looming presence, combined with the feel of his hard arm encircling her.

Willi stepped back, keeping a wary eye on the revolver, then let loose a string of foul curses at Eva. She stiffened under the tirade.

Mortimer transferred the gun to the hand of the arm holding her, then leaned forward and slapped Willi casually across the mouth.

“That sounds awfully like swear-words,” he said. “Tell him to curb his tongue in the presence of a lady, if you please, or I’ll punch his teeth right down his throat.”

Eva translated, word for word. She could see Willi on the moonlit boardwalk glaring hatred, but he fell silent.

“We can’t leave him to raise the alarm. He’ll have to come with us. See if you can find some rope, Miss Boehm. I assume you want a lift to somewhere in particular?” Eva nodded. “Should I expect any further visitors?”

“I don’t think so, but keep a good lookout for his Buka bodyguards. They’ll be hard to see in the dark.”

Slipping from his embrace, Eva took out the matchbox she’d brought, opened it and muttered an unladylike curse as several matches spilled from her shaking fingers. Striking one, she soon found a spare mooring line by its flickering light. She held the revolver gingerly in both hands while Mortimer trussed Willi with speedy expertise, hustled him on board and tied him to one of the stanchions supporting the awning.

“You keep watch,” he told Eva, as he loaded billets of wood from the stack under a tarpaulin on the beach, then loosed the moorings. Pulling along by the roof-posts, he moved the launch out to the seaward end of the boatshed.

“We won’t be surprised out here. If anyone comes, they’ll have to swim,” he whispered, stoking up the fire under the boiler. Satisfied at last, he closed the furnace door and straightened up. “We just have to wait for the pressure to build up. Now, where do you want to go?”

“Queen Emma’s plantation at Ralum.”

“Damn. That’s the opposite direction to where I’m going.” He shrugged. “Never mind. The night’s still young.”

Eva tried to study him, but the darkness in the boatshed defeated her. She’d caught a few glimpses from the fire as it flickered into life, enough only to show a wild, unkempt head

with what seemed like several weeks' growth of beard, and stained and rumpled clothes.

It wasn't a look to inspire confidence, but he radiated an air of strength and casual self-sufficiency that intrigued her. His deep voice had a pleasant, humorous tone to it, and his accent, though strange to her ears, seemed educated. Also, she had done him a service. She would just have to trust him to take that into account and be suitably grateful. After all, she had little choice.

"While we're waiting," she said, "would you mind answering my question?"

"Which one?"

"Both, actually. Where you came from, and why you want this boat."

"I came off my schooner, the *Terrigal*. It was seized by a German gunboat, and they chucked me in the clink at Herbertshöhe."

"What's a 'clink'?"

"Jail."

An escapee! Hardly a recommendation for a rescuer. She shivered.

"What are you, some sort of pirate?"

Mortimer chuckled. "I've been called that in jest on occasion. But they seized my ship illegally. Just because I didn't ask permission from some jumped-up desk-wallah before filling my water casks."

"How did you get out of jail?"

"Through the roof. Their maintenance must be pretty slack. The rafters and shingles were riddled with termites."

"You're trying to get away from the island, is that it? Don't you think this launch is a bit small for the open sea?"

"I only want to use it to tow my ship out of harbor. They anchored it in the bay up there, off the coaling station at Matupi, and there's not much wind inshore tonight." He struck a match to check the pressure gauge. The sudden flare gave his shaggy profile a hard and ruthless look. Despite her anxiety, Eva wondered how far a shave would go toward improving it.

"I saw this boat from the cell window this afternoon," he went on. "It dropped some people off then headed west. That's the way I wanted to go, so when I got out I walked along the beach until I came to it, here in the shed."

"Weren't you afraid of the cannibals?"

"What cannibals?"

"Willi here told me if I tried to get away along the beach, cannibals would eat me."

Hugo Mortimer laughed. "The coastal natives gave up eating people quite a few years ago. I think your Willi was just spinning you a yarn."

He had a strange turn of phrase. What did cannibals, Willi, and wool have in common? It must be some sort of slang for a tall story. "He's not *my* Willi. Are you English?" she asked.

"Australian, from Sydney. And you?"

"American."

"What's an American girl doing in this God-forsaken hole?"

"It's a long story. How much longer will it be before this overgrown kettle gets up pressure?"

"Not long." He opened the firebox door to throw in more wood, then turned to study her

before closing it. The glare lit them up to chest height, leaving their faces in shadow. Eva could see from the glint of his eyes that he was appraising her legs and hips.

“Is this some new American fashion?” he asked, a bantering lilt in his deep molasses voice. “I must say it never occurred to me a girl’d look attractive in trousers, but you manage to fill—”

“They belonged to my late brother,” Eva cut in stiffly. “I don’t own any bloomers, so I chose them as appropriate clothing to escape in. I didn’t want skirts getting in the way if it came to running away from a cannibal. You know, I sometimes wonder if women’s fashions are chosen by men to hobble them and make them helpless.”

Mortimer laughed again. “You don’t seem the type who could be helplessly hobbled, Eva Boehm. Anyway, what’s this about escaping? Were you being held prisoner too?”

“In a manner of speaking. Willi here was trying to force me to marry him.”

“And you decided you’d rather risk being eaten? You must be the first woman I’ve met who’s as dead-set against marriage as I am!”

“It’s not so much the institution of marriage I’m against, Mr. Mortimer. I have no fixed ideas for or against marriage in general, merely marriage to Willi in particular.”

“Hmm.” Mortimer moved over to inspect Willi more closely. “Can’t say I blame you. He’s a bit on the bugle, isn’t he?”

“What on earth does that mean?”

“On the nose. Whiffy. Stinks.” He moved back beside her, fanning his face with his hand. “What’s the matter, don’t you understand the Queen’s English?”

“My English is fine. It’s the Australian that troubles me.” It suddenly occurred to Eva that in spite of a week or two in jail and a long trek along the beach, Hugo Mortimer didn’t smell offensive. Perhaps he’d had a swim along the way, but in fact he smelt rather ... exciting.

He struck a match and tapped the pressure gauge. “One hobble has been removed, anyway. We’re up to pressure.”

He cast off the one remaining mooring, then did something mysterious with valves and levers. Eva knew she would never have been able to work them out on her own. Chuffing cheerfully, the launch eased out toward the open sea. The awning rattled briefly as Willi tested his bonds, then he settled back as Mortimer whipped around to glare at him.

Eva pointed out the poles marking the opening in the reef, barely visible against the white foam of gently breaking waves.

As they cleared the reef and the boat began a gentle pitching in the swell, her mind catalogued the night’s events. She remembered Willi’s threats, and her escape attempt would damn her irrevocably in his eyes. And, to compound the felony, here she was aiding and abetting a possible criminal to escape. That would also earn the enmity of Administrator Schmiele. Even Queen Emma might not be able to protect her. In fact, why should Emma Kolbe help her, a stranger, at all? She’d been clutching at straws.

“You’ll pay for this night’s work, Eva,” Willi hissed, confirming her apprehension, as if she needed any confirmation. “I’ll see that you—”

“Shut up,” Mortimer snapped. Willi subsided again.

As Mortimer turned the boat toward Herbertshöhe, Eva saw she had no choice but to leave German New Guinea, and no means to carry out her objective, except with this piratical stranger. She made up her mind. Captain Frankl had told her that Australia shared a lot of

similarities with America. It would have to do.

She asked abruptly, "What's Sydney like?"

"Why do you ask?"

Eva's tension boiled over into exasperation. "Do you always answer a question with another question?"

"That depends on the congruity of the question. This seems hardly the occasion for a discourse on geography."

"I have a good reason for asking. Believe me."

He shrugged. "Hm. Let's see. It's a lot like San Francisco, I suppose. But the climate is better and our harbor is prettier."

Eva had never seen San Francisco, but if Sydney was anything like an American city, that would suit her.

"Please turn around, Mr. Mortimer."

He turned obligingly to face her where she sat in the stern, as far from Willi as possible, hemmed in by the long tiller he held.

"I meant the boat. Would you agree that I've done you a service, Mr. Mortimer?"

"I certainly would, Miss Boehm."

"Then I wish to beg a service in return. Please take me to Sydney with you."

He sat still for a moment. Eva had the feeling he was smiling. She couldn't be sure with the whiskers and the gloom, but she heard a definite smile in his voice when he said, "With pleasure, Miss Boehm," and put the tiller over.