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CHAPTER ONE

Journal of Bonnie MacDonald
May 11th 1974
Amnuythip, Thailand.
Hooray! Tomorrow the Amelia Earhart Cadets go to the island with Layla Campbell.

Senior Amelia Earhart Cadets:
Hope
May and Arlene (The Barbie Babes)
Jas
Me

Juniors
Jody
Natalie
Sandy
Carly

To pack:
Journal
Waterproof holder for journal (v. important)
Sleeping bag
Torch (take lots of spare batteries)

Pencils
Rucksack
Book? Ask Mum for recommendation
Swiss Army knife
Change of clothes
Flip-flops
Towel
Toothbrush and wash things
Mozzie coil

Finally, we're off. It's bucketing down, the roads are flooded and you can hardly see out of the windscreen as there aren't any wipers, so the Duchess hangs out of the window and mops it with her tie-dyed scarf so the driver can navigate. She asks me to hold on to her legs so she doesn't fall out. She has these really long legs. Jas and I are laughing like mad.

The road disappears completely at one point and you can't tell where the ditches and fields begin. We're making a wake like a motorboat. People are wading through water to get home, their belongings in bundles on their heads. Only the gentle-faced water buffalo look unperturbed. They're in their element.

I glimpse through a gap in the frangipani trees a girl of about my age, her heart-shaped face made up like a woman's, scarlet lip colour, black eye kohl and powdered cheeks. Her black hair, decorated with red and orange flowers, is like a waterfall to her tiny waist. She stands on a balcony and looks as if she is waiting for someone to press a button so her life can begin.

Bar girls and their scrawny-legged bosses squat on tables

and look bored; Buddhist monks in orange robes hold umbrellas over their shaved heads, and confused pi-dogs swim around looking for a place to stand and bark at the suddenly wet world.

Inside the bus the juniors are shrieking and whooping every time the water gets really deep outside. There are stranded vehicles all over the place.

In the back of the bus, between bumps and careering, May is attempting to apply mascara to Arlene's eyelashes. They both turned up wearing no make-up but they have transformed themselves from senior cadets into *femmes fatales* in a matter of minutes, with bright pink lipstick and blue eye shadow. Arlene shrieks—a lump of mascara in her eye.

'Spider-eyes! You look like you've got spiders around your eyes!' May hitches up her boob tube and laughs.

Jas rolls her eyes at me.

Jody, Carly, and Sandy are staring out of the windows, clutching their teddy bears. It's their first camp. Carly and Sandy are the only ones wearing cadet uniform—khaki skirt and shirt, with a red neckerchief. Natalie is huddled in the corner looking anxious.

'Don't worry, Nat, we'll get through,' I tell her and she smiles faintly through her frown and carries on sucking the satin edge of her rag.

Sandy is the smallest girl, with pale hair and skin and skinny limbs. She looks as if she'd float away if you blew on her. Jas pulls her onto her lap so she doesn't get too bumped around on the bad roads.

The sun comes out by the time we're on the boat, but it's a rough trip and nearly everyone is sick. Not me, though.

Hope manages to vomit into the wind and gets it all over her orange sweatshirt.

'Are we there yet?' Sandy moans. She is as green as the praying mantis I found in my bedroom last week or one of the snakes the Thai boys torture on the compound.

The juniors' teddy bears are sodden.

An hour's boat trip is about as much as I can take at the best of times. The secret is to keep your eyes on the horizon so your brain can make sense of what is happening to your body. Daddy told me that. He used to vomit in his helmet when he first started flying. Now he flies Phantom F4s. He's in the Special Air Services Regiment deployed as an instructor to the United States Air Force front-line base at Utapao, an hour's drive away from our home compound at Amnuythip. Before that he was an instructor in Borneo in the war against Sukarno.

We've been in Thailand for two years. We don't see much of him; he mostly has to stay on the base, and when we do see him he looks very tired with dark bags under his eyes, and his wavy brown hair has gone completely grey. But he's still handsome. These days he has a very short fuse, and I mostly stay out of his way. Mum says that's wisest. Daddy reckons the war will be over in less than a year. We'll go back to Scotland then.

It'll be great seeing Grandpa and Grandma again, but it will be hard leaving friends here and I do love Thai food, especially sticky rice. There's a little beach bar at Amnuythip where they have the best sticky rice ever. We have parties there sometimes when Daddy and the other fathers are home. The Buddhist bar owner was a monk for many years and he's covered in tiny tattoos, mostly words,

like a newspaper of flesh. He and his wife cook chicken, pork, prawns, stalked barnacles, clams, lobster and rice stick noodles with all sorts of herbs and spices—ginger, coriander, lemongrass and galangal. They were childhood sweethearts and lost touch with each other for years, but met again when she was a widow with five children. Mum thinks that's so romantic. I remember one evening when we were all there having fun and the parents were drinking beer and laughing, a Thai man on the beach shot himself in the foot. He was very drunk and probably didn't feel a thing, Mum said.

There's a tiny part of me that wishes Mum were here. Mrs Campbell smiles and hugs the little ones, but I can tell that's she's worried. The boat bumps and shudders on the waves.

We're nearing the island when the outboard motor stutters and stops.

'What's up?'

'Are we out of fuel?'

The boat is drifting side-on to the waves, which makes it plunge sickeningly. The boatman, who looks about a hundred years old, can't get the motor started. He only has one eye, like the guard's wife in our compound. Her eye socket is stuffed with cotton waste and the boatman's is covered with a black patch like a pirate.

'Isn't *that* where we are supposed to be going, Mrs Campbell? We've gone too far.' I point to the landing place we came to last time we camped.

The sea sweeps us quickly past the island and we seem to be drifting fast. The current is really strong.

'I'm sure the boatman knows what he's doing, Bonnie.'

We watch him doing things to the outboard motor but it still won't start. We've gone way past our little island, and lots of others too. They rise like big lush anthills straight out of the water.

The boatman hauls up a small canvas sail and gabbles at us. I don't know what he's saying but the Duchess translates.

Rather than tack back against the wind and current to our island, which will take hours, she explains, he's taking us to another, which is much bigger than the one we had planned to camp on, but has a landing place and fresh water, he says. Or that's what Mrs Campbell reckons he says. Is her Thai really that good? I'm impressed. But the others are appalled.

'There are over fifty islands in this archipelago,' shouts Mrs Campbell between screams and groans.

'I don't care where we stop as long as it's soon,' I tell Jas. She nods wearily and we huddle closer together. Waves crash over us and the boat is nearly swamped a couple of times. We use our hands to bail out.

'Where are the lifebelts? No lifebelts? No, of course not. Why did I ever say yes to this stupid trip?'

'Shut up, Spider-eyes, will you just shut up!'

The Barbie Babes (Jas and I thought of that name) squabble at the best of times. And this is not the best of times.

We are getting very close to a reef. Waves build up into breaking surf and our boatman steers carefully towards a gap between two exposed rocks and coral heads. As the boat reaches the gap it is raised high on a wave and we are swept into a lagoon.

There is a thin stretch of sand and, on the right, black rocks reaching out into the sea, like a natural harbour, except that as we get closer we can see that waves are surging between the rocks, making it dangerous to get too close.

Another wave surfs us in to land safely on a steeply sloping beach. As quickly as we can, we lift the little girls over the side and help Mrs Campbell unload the tents and bags and boxes of provisions. She gives me her guitar to carry.

'Oh, solid land!' Arlene sinks to her knees and kisses the sand. Then splutters and spits. Anything to avoid helping.

Jas, Hope, and I run back and forth, carrying the rucksacks and provisions. The water swirls around us and the boat twists in the restless waters.

For some reason the boatman won't put his feet on the island. Mrs Campbell tries to get him to help unload the crates of bottled water but he shakes his head, yelling, '*Yaksha! Yaksha! Ko Tabu!*' and keeps pointing back to the mainland.

It takes all our strength to pull the crates ashore. Mrs Campbell beckons the others to help shove the boat off the beach and the boatman doesn't even wave as he turns towards the sea. He gives up trying to get the outboard going and sails now for the mainland, after a difficult launch over the surf. We won't see him until he picks us up in three days' time.

'What was he saying, Mrs Campbell?'

'Nothing, Bonnie. A silly taboo. The locals don't come here if they can help it.'

'Why don't they?'

'He didn't say. It's only superstition, whatever it is.'

'What's *Yaksha?*'

‘I think it’s something to do with Hindu gods, isn’t it? A temple guardian?’ says Jas.

‘Giant. A mythical giant,’ murmurs Mrs Campbell.

I feel as if we are still rising and plunging on the waves and eventually have to sit down while my head settles.

‘I’m going to explore.’

‘No, not yet, May, we need to set up camp first. Then you can search for wood for a camp fire.’ Mrs Campbell slaps May’s bottom with the flat of her hand and May shrieks, laughing. Everyone smiles, relieved to be together and safe.

It’s paradise, no adults to spoil things. I don’t count the Duchess as an adult. She’s fun. I look around, making mental notes for my journal. There are wispy casuarinas and tall coconut palms at the top of the beach and green jungle rising steeply in a backdrop. The pale strip of beach is nearly covered by water, and there’s all sorts of flotsam and jetsam on the tide line. Treasures to take home and to write about in my journal.

Most of us wanted to pitch camp under a banyan tree—beneath its spreading branches. But Jas insisted it was bad luck to sleep under a banyan—something about ghosts and demons living in the branches.

So we end up choosing a clear space near the banyan, above the high tide mark.

It’s hard work pitching our tent but great fun. The wind keeps whipping it away from us, and Jas and I laugh hysterically, almost wetting ourselves. I’m glad Jas is with me and also pleased Mum didn’t come now. She’d have complained about the primitive sleeping arrangements and refused to use the latrine, which we seniors have dug well away from the camp.

We drape mosquito nets over our sleeping bags, though it must be too windy for mozzies. I can save my mosquito coil for another night. I love the way the burnt embers look like a dead, desiccated, curled-up snake in the morning.

The Duchess unpacks our Thai cooker, a simple barbecue with a lid on it, places the charcoal inside and lights it now so it will be good and hot for cooking our supper.

'Now you can look for firewood, but don't stray far from the beach, please, girls, and keep an eye on the wee girls.'

She means the juniors. In Amelia Earhart Cadets we have seniors (14 to 17 years) and junior members (between 9 and 13 years). You can become a chief cadet if you pass ten tests with credit. I have only passed five so far: First Aid; Knots; Woodwork; Swimming; Navigation. I haven't been a cadet for very long. The only chief cadet among us is Jas, who, like me, is fourteen. She's brilliant at everything, but you can't feel envious or cross about it because she is so sweet natured. She's the sort of girl who would give her last square of chocolate; she doesn't gossip and she can keep a secret. That's rare.

We all walk along the narrow strip of white sand, gathering shells and driftwood. There are striped tiger cowries and fragments of oyster, cone shells, and pink tellins, like a baby's fingernails. We don't get these on the beach at Amnuythip. There's nothing on the sand there apart from filter tips and prawn shells.

The wind drives fine grains of sand into our eyes and forces the waves far up the beach, sending spume flying like soap suds through the air. Still, I find so many lovely shells I can't carry them all. And there's plenty of driftwood and huge chunks of chestnut-coloured kelp dragged up from the

deep. We end up with quite a pile of wood to keep the fire going and Mrs Campbell is delighted.

'We've brought plenty of charcoal,' she says, 'but there's nothing quite like a wood fire.'

She says we should map the island while we're here and invent names for the beaches and landmarks. That's our only task apart from keeping a journal, which I do anyway. I write all sorts of things in my journal—like love poems to Lan Kua, which I've never shown him, of course. Lan Kua says I am *Pee Prai*—a beautiful woman spirit who entices men to fall in love with her. He's such a charmer, and I am not a flirt. I like to sketch in my journal and stick found things into it, like interesting matchbox covers, leaves and flowers, Thai labels, feathers and photographs, stuff from magazines that I don't want to lose, and other poems that I write that are fit to be seen by the general public—unlike the love poems.

We explore the beach, which I have named Landing Place. At one point there's no sand, only jagged rocks that rise to a peak about fifty feet high, so we have to clamber over those at sea level. I've named that Dragon Point, because that's what it looks like, the tail pointing into the sea, the large head facing inland. Hope points out a shallow cave looking over the tail. She has to shout above the noise of the wind. We only cover a tiny part of the island's circumference, I reckon, but we'll do some more tomorrow. It's much bigger than the island we were supposed to have camped on. But this one is definitely more interesting. And if it has fresh water why isn't it inhabited? That's the kind of thing my dad would think about if he was here.

We head back towards the camp.

The little kids are paddling, running in and out of the swooshing waves as they run up the steep beach. I sit down to watch the tiny bubble crabs organize grains of sand into balls. I could watch them for ever. Ghost crabs run towards the sea and get swept back by waves. Sea birds scream and whirl in the wind.

Sandy calls in a thin high voice, 'Hi, Bonnie, aren't you coming in?' She looks like lots of white-skinned kids who live in the tropics—pale with dark bags under her eyes. There's no sun, just low grey clouds, so she won't burn anyway. Mum says I'm lucky. My skin tans easily and I love the heat and sun.

'Don't swim just here, kids, there's a rip, by the look of it.' I have learned to read the sea from my grandfather in Scotland. He's a good fisherman. I'm not much good but he says he's going to teach me one day, when we go back to live nearby.

'A rip?' shouts Arlene. 'What's that when it's at home?'

'It's a sort of surge of water going from the shore to the sea: a very strong current. Don't go too far,' I call. But they are too scared to come to harm, which is good.

They screech with excitement as each wave threatens to grab them by the ankles and carry them off.

'You are such a know-all, Bonnie MacDonald.' Arlene pokes out her tongue. I ignore her. I know what I'm talking about.

'And you are such a know-nothing, Arlene Spider-eyes,' shouts May. Arlene hurls herself at May, who shrieks, splashing and laughing.

Huge dark clouds growl, and for a moment the sea looks as if it will engulf us all. Colours are somehow brighter,

more vivid, held in by the strange thick ceiling of green-grey. It's wonderful sitting here, watching, I feel so alive. Here we are on our very own desert island: nine of us, and Layla Campbell. It's like the best adventure we could possibly have.

May, Arlene, and Hope have been rummaging in the boxes of equipment and go fishing in a large rocky pool near the shore with a fishing net taped on the end of a bamboo pole and a hand-held fishing line. Or rather, Hope fishes and the Barbie Babes sit and watch and make stupid comments. Hope falls in up to her shoulders, which is pretty deep as she's really tall, and loses a flip-flop and her glasses. They spend more time fishing for her glasses than for anything edible but bring back some little silver fish, which we'll cook later.

The juniors have claimed their own private playground under the banyan. The hundreds of roots growing down from branches act as props and form arches and passageways, and the girls run in and out of them and swing from them. They're having the time of their lives.

Jas says banyans are sacred to Hindus and Buddhists and represent eternal life.

'I thought you said there are bad spirits in them?'

Jas shrugs. 'There's good and bad spirits everywhere.' She's very knowledgeable about Thailand. Her mother runs a 'Get to Know the Locals' group and she invites people to come to talk to them about Hindu and Buddhist customs. I get all my local knowledge from Lan Kua who has made it his job to educate me. He teaches me naughty words in Thai

and when I say them he screams with laughter and does handstands on the balcony rails of our house. He's good fun. Dad doesn't approve of him.

Mrs Campbell has been working hard and as the light fades we eat hamburger with buns, and Hope's delicious little fish. Then we toast marshmallows and sing songs around our campfire, red sparks flying into the black sky like fireflies. Mrs Campbell pulls out her guitar, and plucks the strings. She looks every bit the Duchess and Jas and I smile at each other, knowing we're both thinking the same.

'What's that tune?'

'*Don't care if it rains or freezes,*

'long as I got my plastic Jesus . . . '

'Oh yeah, *Cool Hand Luke*. I *lurv* Paul Newman.'

'Yeah, those gorgeous blue eyes.' May flutters her eyelashes.

The Duchess carries on with the thin tune Paul Newman played on the banjo in the movie when he heard his mother had died.

'Time to turn in now, you young ones,' she says as she ends the song, but we're all having too much fun and Jody, Sandy, Natalie, and Carly ignore her, getting up and running down to the sea to whoop and screech, jumping away from the rushing waves. Even scaredy-cat Natalie is joining in, though she's taken her comfort rag with her.

'"What we have here is a failure to communicate,"' quotes Jas, speaking in a nasal drawl like the prison boss in *Cool Hand Luke,* and I laugh.

'Sing that song you made up, Bonz,' Jas urges me.

'You write songs?' Mrs Campbell's eyes light up and she smiles at me.

'No, not really. Poems.'

'Poems? I love poetry. You must read me your poems sometime.'

I'm glad it's dark as I can feel my cheeks redden with pleasure.

Then the Duchess strums and sings sweetly:

'*Where have all the flowers gone,*

Long time passing?'

'It's a beautifully sad song,' I say.

'It's an anti-war song, Bonnie. Did you know that?' she asks.

'You're not anti-war are you, Mrs Campbell?'

'A rather unorthodox and dangerous thing to be if you live on a US military base in wartime, don't you think?'

'I guess.' She didn't answer my question.

The Duchess sings again.

'You have a lovely voice, Mrs Campbell,' says Jas.

'Oh no, Jasmine.' Suddenly her laugh has no humour. 'My husband . . . ' Her voice cracks, 'My husband was a *true* musician.' She strums a few chords and bends her head, a curtain of auburn hair covering her face. Without saying any more we follow the juniors away down the beach into the shadows, to leave her to her thoughts.

We play tag, running in and out of the darkness, chasing each other and squealing with pretend terror. The wind sweeps our voices away. Hope gives the juniors towel rides. They love it, even Natalie. They are like little monkeys climbing all over her. I look back and watch the Duchess as she lies by the fire, smoking, drinking from a bottle. She looks so romantic in her ankle length antique petticoat with lace around the hem. It's dyed a bright crimson, and

with it she wears an embroidered white peasant blouse with ribbon threaded around the loose neck. She has such style, the Duchess; she looks so unusual, so individual.

'Have you noticed she isn't wearing a bra?' Arlene whispers loudly to May.

'Yeah, so what? Her tits are bigger and perkier than yours.'

'Are not.'

'Are.'

'Are not.'

Arlene pushes May over sideways and May pushes her back and they both giggle. Jody's pleading voice interrupts their bickering. 'Mikey says can we stay here for ever?'

'Who the hell's Mikey?' Arlene asks.

'Her imaginary friend. Yes, Jody, if you like. We'll join the monkeys and gibbons in the trees and eat fruit and leaves.' I quite like the idea of living on a desert island. Though I could do without Arlene and May.

There are no stars tonight and the wind has worsened, or improved, depending on your point of view. If I were the wind I would want to go faster and faster and whip the trees and push houses over just to show how strong I was. So, the wind has actually improved her performance, not worsened it.

And if the sea feels things too, maybe he wants to get higher and fiercer too, hooliganizing the shore. Perhaps all the elements are fighting for supremacy, determined to be the most powerful force.

I'm dizzy on cola and fresh air and excitement. The juniors are rubbing their eyes from tiredness and the smoke. The occasional bright star exposes itself between clouds,

but then the sky descends, dropping rain from its blackness. It drives towards us in sheets across the sea and we flee, laughing, to our tents.

Tucked into our sleeping bags I read aloud to Jas from the book I brought with me—*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert M. Pirsig. It's a little soggy around the edges but not too bad. Mum's just read it and says it's interesting and adult, and it's a cult classic and it's about time I read something intelligent and challenging. She's always got her head in a book. It really annoys Dad. I'm more of a physical person, like him. I like to be doing things rather than reading about them.

'Give it a go, you'll like it,' she said. So I'm trying to read it, but it's hard work. I find it's easier to understand if I read it out loud.

'*Everything gets written down, formally, so that you know at all times where you are, where you've been, where you're going and where you want to get. . . . Sometimes just the act of writing down the problems straightens out your head as to what they really are*.' In the book he's talking about fixing the bike, but I think that advice applies to lots of problems. I'm always writing down my problems—like—if Lan Kua wanted to kiss me, would I say yes? My journal knows all my secrets.

'Do you think Lan Kua is serious about me?' I ask Jas.

She knows how keen I am on Lan Kua.

'Yeah, sure he is and he's cute, but not good enough for you.'

'He's going to be a monk soon,' I tell her.

'I thought he wanted to be a kick boxer.'

'Yeah, he does, but it's something most Thai boys do,

you know? Like a rite of passage or something. He was ordained last year, and he has to spend time as a monk to gain merit for his family.'

The canvas billows like a sail on a yacht.

'Weird. Will he be allowed to have sex?'

'Jas! Stop it.' We hit each other, giggling.

'Time to settle down now,' Mrs Campbell calls to us above the noise of the wind and the tents. 'It's been a long day for us all.'

I unwrap my journal and write in it quickly. I couldn't possibly stay awake long enough to write about everything that's happened today.

12th May Day 1 on the island, 11 p.m.
Wonderful day, wonderful island—THE WRONG ISLAND, but who cares! Paradise.

But it sure is windy!

I slip the book and journal back inside the waterproof folder and tuck it inside my sleeping bag against my leg. Jas is breathing as if she's already asleep. I check that my sneakers are close by—have to wear them so we don't get the dreaded chiggers (pesky critters, they are such small mites you can hardly see them, but they cause such discomfort)—before I switch off my torch, which I've looped around my wrist.