

Mendil, Netherlands East Indies, 2nd March 1942

Darkness was descending upon the world. Centuries of European dominance was paying the price for luxurious complacency and misplaced racial superiority. Under a rolling cloud of despair and fear, a room lay secure in its own tiny world of dim light. In that world of shadow, a figure stood in contemplation, its image reflected in a mirror framed with dark, hand crafted teak. The posture was parade ground perfect. The 'at ease' position created a sense of restrained confidence, hands clasped against the small of the back, feet apart in line with the shoulders. The uniform created a new image, covering the slim, young body with room to spare. It also delivered the presence and authority that was urgently needed.

The owner of the uniform lay sprawled on the floor. The knife that had killed him was embedded in the back of his skull. The upward thrust into the brain had ensured no blood would draw attention to the wearer of his uniform. Stains and dirt on the uniform acquired from days of desperate activity added extra authenticity.

Miek Hansen has taken the identity of Captain Piers Bastiaan of the Naval Air Force (MLD) Dutch East Indies. A Luger pistol slipped into the money belt under the jacket gave a feeling of comfort and security. Sentimental attachment to that pistol would add suitable authority to what needed to be done.

Flights out of the Netherlands East Indies couldn't go on much longer. The Japanese Imperial Army was moving south relentlessly and unstoppable. Singapore had fallen barely fifteen days before. The evacuation program was a desperate effort by the Royal Dutch Indies Air Force (KNIL), the Naval Air Force (MLD) and the Royal Dutch Netherlands East Indies Airline (KNILM), to get people away from the Japanese Imperial Army. Many of the evacuees lucky enough to get a seat were MLD aircrew who no longer had any aircraft to fly, or the families of MLD aircrew.

As the Japanese advanced from the north, Dutch bases were destroyed or abandoned, their aircraft dispersed among the rivers and lakes of East Java. Flying boats were departing from secret hiding places in Lake Grati, Lengkong, Teloengagoeng, Mendil and the Bantas River. Darwin and Broome, on the north-west coast of Australia, were the only safe havens. Broome lay south, well away from the Japanese. It was a long flight at extreme range given the passenger loads crammed into the aircraft. Land-based DC-3s and Lodestars were still leaving but time was fast running out. The uniform would help ensure there was space on an aircraft for the new 'Piers Bastiaan'. With luck, one aircraft in particular.

With barely a glance at the second body sprawled in the corner of the room, the figure paused beside the real Piers Bastiaan, lost in contemplation. Emotion was thrust aside as a pointless distraction. A mission needed closure. Without a final glance, the figure left the room, slamming the door on a life the war had destroyed forever.

Chapter 1

Jed Mitchell leans back in a garden chair, twirling the stem of a champagne glass between his fingers. He contemplates Alex sitting opposite, equally relaxed. Alexander Dulaine looks dangerous, even wearing farm clothes, gumboots and twirling her glass of champagne. Stray strands of blonde hair fall lazily across her left eye. Flashes of smouldering fire dance in the depths of her right eye as she sips champagne. The first time they met, he sensed an aura of

danger shimmering around her, like a King Brown snake rearing its head beside an outback channel. The aura is still there, pulsating randomly. Now it reminds him of a lioness crouched patiently among stands of grass teased by a gentle breeze whispering gently across an African plain. Exciting beyond description!

He has nothing to complain about. He created her. No, not quite. He honed the potential that lay in wait for the right time and place to bloom. He tuned her skills and attitude to a razor's edge. He built on the foundations of her spirit and past experience, and taught her how to defend herself with a Colt .45. He can't complain because they both crossed a boundary few people experience or understand. They had both killed because they chose to live. Now they share champagne on a pleasant spring evening. The sandstone patio gives an expansive view over the Tasmanian bush as the local birdlife chirps away in secret communication.

Jed decides to share his thoughts, "Forgive me for being a little wary, Alex. I just can't shake the recollection that on our last trip together you tried to shoot me."

A brown eye, not hidden behind the stray strands of blonde hair, burns into him like a laser, unwilling to offer the slightest compromise. "You had a gun pointed at me."

In this relationship, Jed has learned to be patient. "True, but you pointed yours first and I didn't pull the trigger. You did."

"You're overreacting! The Colt didn't fire and nothing happened. Get over it."

Nothing happened! She killed Decker, her abuser. He shot Jesse, the nutcase son, as he was about to achieve closure in his father's journey of revenge against Alex. They buried both of them in the wilds of northern Australia. They share the secret between them. The Colt she pointed at him misfired because of an old, corroded round – just pure chance. And he's overreacting? Jed's been on a steep learning curve since he met Alex. He's learned when to keep his mouth shut. There are things he would like to spit out but he knows the consequences could be unpredictable. He chooses not to spoil it.

"Besides," Alex continues, knowing she has a point to make. "You pissed me off, big time. Take it as a lesson. When the situation arises again, the responses are easy. Yes Ms Dulaine, No Ms Dulaine, how do you like your coffee Ms Dulaine? It's easy."

He still doesn't know what she does to earn a living. It sounds like teacher talk but he doesn't ask. He knows she has a good point. Taking Decker's bullet was a life-changing experience for her and he was responsible. "I'll keep that in mind."

She certainly looks dangerous. Seductively dangerous! Jed enjoys living on the edge and he's hooked. He can only try not to make it obvious. Only he knows the vulnerability that lurks behind Alex's shield of toughness. He learned a hard lesson about the importance of trust while looking down the barrel of her Colt .45 but doesn't regret making the trip to see her.

He smiles, confident but wary. "I'm naturally forgiving so let's put that little matter aside. What's with the newspaper clippings?" He indicates the clippings on the table between them. She'd sent him two articles and a note with her address. Naturally, he has come to find out more. He puts his finger on one of them. "There's less to go on here than with our last mission."

Her brow furrows in thought. “Since getting back from our little trip, I’ve analysed our time together and come to some conclusions.”

‘Our little trip’ involved finding her grandfather’s aircraft lost in World War II and dealing with Decker and his son.

It sounds ominous. Jed sees another opportunity to keep his mouth shut.

“With Decker gone, I finally achieved the freedom I yearned for, yet there is still something missing.”

Very ominous indeed, Jed ponders in attentive silence as the champagne sits undisturbed.

“Loneliness is something no one should endure. Within it lies all the pain and suffering of isolation and separation from the world. It’s an empty world that feeds disconnection and emptiness to create a dark abyss in which satisfaction can never be found.”

She stops to gather her thoughts. Jed lets her gather them alone and in silence. His attention zeroes in with even greater focus.

“I felt it beckon me into its unfathomable depths. The cord linking me to that lonely, empty fate was severed by looking into the eyes of death. You took a gamble. I’m alive and free because of it.”

She should write a book on philosophy. Jed keeps the champagne bubbles under control and his mouth firmly shut. A man can learn valuable lessons in the wilds of Australia.

“Through the adventure we shared, understanding has emerged. What I have sought is a loyal friend who can walk by my side, not in my shadow. Someone I can trust and with whom I can find peace.” Alex takes a sip from her glass.

Jed waits expectantly, wondering where she is going on this journey of reflection.

“We looked death in the face and did what many would consider wrong but I have never felt so alive, so full of the energy of life. I want to experience it again to see where it leads.”

Jed breathes a sigh of silent relief. It’s not what he expected. Is he in love with this woman or in love with the knife edge adventure they shared? He doesn’t know but he wants to find out. His thoughts are interrupted.

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“What question?”

Alex’s finger stabs at her handwritten note on the table.

Jed glances down at the note. Above her address is the question. ‘So, are you man enough for another one?’ We haven’t had a first one yet, he’s tempted to reply. Instead he exercises wise caution.

“For another what?”

She teases away wayward strands of blonde hair with a flick of her head. “You bloody well know and you enjoyed it even more than I did!”

The proposition is left dangling but unspoken. She’s right. Adventure sets the blood pounding through the body and sharpens senses far beyond the experience of ordinary living. Jed understands but deflects the moment.

“Let’s talk about it over dinner. Can you manage a stir-fry?”

Alex nods and winks. “As long as it’s accompanied by a good wine.”

Jed winks in return and takes a big risk. “Trust me!”