## **ALEX EVELYN**

All across the city...

The

a mystery is growing...

Secret



The 

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#### FOR MY PARENTS, JEAN AND ROGER, FOR BEING SO VERY, VERY SPECIAL.





## **CHAPTER ONE**

"Aren't you beautiful? I could hardly pass you by without a quick look, could I? Besides, those two are always in *such* a hurry."

The bird was no bigger than a cotton reel, its tiny wings beating a hundred times faster than a human heart to keep it airborne. As it dipped its long, curved beak in and out of a flower, it was watched by a girl with a frizzy halo of cinnamon-coloured hair. She reached quietly into the front pocket of her dungarees and her fingers settled on the hilt of a magnifying glass.

"Would you mind if I draw you? Don't tell *them* I was talking to you – they only think of you as something for scientific research. To them you're just a collection of chemical compounds, they can't imagine that you might have a personality too."

As she leaned in, magnifying glass to her eye, it wasn't the jewel-coloured feathers of the hummingbird that the girl was interested in, but the elegant scarlet trumpet flower the creature was taking its lunch from. She rested a sketchbook on her knee, licked the end of her pencil and began to draw.

"Thank you for staying so still..."

As she outlined the plant's long thick stem with broad strokes, the bird, startled by the appearance of a round piece of glass with an enlarged green eye behind it, flew away to find another flower. The girl ran her finger along the edge of the trumpet, delighting in the cool, velvety feel of it. Then she peered inside the top to see the nectar the hummingbird had been drinking from.

"That is so clever, like a perfect little jug. I wonder what it tastes like. Maybe I'll try a little, would you mind?" She lifted her finger, ready to dip it into the flower, and at that moment an angry cry rumbled through the understory of the rainforest, making her drop her pencil.

"Fern!"

Hastily she pushed her sketchbook back into her bag and set off at a run through the tangled, twisted undergrowth.

"Sorry, Dad," she panted. "I was looking at this *amazing* flower. You should have seen the colour." She thrust her sketchbook under his nose and he looked at her drawing. His disapproval was evident in the way he curled up the outer edges of his nostrils.

"What is its Latin name, Fern?"

"Um ... is it an orchid?" she said.

"No, Fern, it is a *Heliconia rostrata*. A lobster claw heliconia. What is its family?"

"Prawns?" she giggled.

Darwin Featherstone shook his head. "The *Heliconia* plant is part of the *Heliconiaceae* family. You should know how to identify these simple plants by now." He turned away and peered into the rainforest ahead. "We must hurry. I want day camp set up by twelve hundred hours so that your mother and I have the whole afternoon to hunt. Sunset is at nineteen hundred hours and we have a long list of plants to find before then."

Her dad set off again, poking his walking stick into the forest floor as he went to check there was nothing lurking in the thick carpet of rainforest.

"These boots are so heavy," said Fern as she halfran to keep up. "I'm sure they're giving me blisters. Why can't I take them off?"

"You can't walk through the Amazon Rainforest barefoot, Fern, we might have another *incident*," said her mum, who had been waiting for them patiently. Defina had grown up in the lush green mountains of the South Island of New Zealand and was a taller version of Fern, with the same cloud of red hair, but without Fern's constellation of freckles that she'd inherited from her Scottish dad.

"But we've been walking since we woke up."

"And we will walk some more," her dad called back. "Keep your eyes peeled for Brazilian wandering spiders – they don't make webs, they walk along the floor. You wouldn't want to meet one of those, I can tell you, even with your boots on."

As the sun hit its highest point in the sky, her dad stopped. He looked left, then right, he looked behind and in front, and then he heaved down the heavy wooden trunk he was carrying.

"Flat ground, good visibility and partial shade," he said. "The perfect spot for our day camp. Let's unload."

First they unpacked microscopes for studying stamens, stigmas and anthers – small portable ones that could be whipped out to look at a plant where it grew. Then there were the weather instruments: barometers and rain gauges for making sure they were not caught out by a tropical storm. The Featherstone family had worked in some of the most extreme environments of the world, hunting out rare plants for medical research, and the weather was often fierce.

"Can I come today?" asked Fern. "I'll be very good. I won't drop anything, or dig up the wrong plant."

"You have studies to do." Her dad kept his eyes focused on what he was doing.

"I could do it ever so quickly and then come and

help you? I promise I won't cut off the flowers to make a necklace this time."

"How will you become a great plant hunter yourself if you don't dedicate time to your lessons? Learn first, field work later." He pulled on a pair of thick leather gloves to protect his hands, and Fern handed him a small pack which he hoisted onto his shoulder. Then she moved over to her mum and stood hopefully by her side.

"Can I come with you, Mum?"

Defina pulled out a box of soil sample jars and put one in her plant-hunting bag.

"You must do as your father says, Fern-bug," she said in her soft lilting voice.

"I'll be very quiet, I promise. I won't sing or talk to the plants or do *anything* to distract you."

Fern's mum settled a kiss on her cheek. "Not today." She glanced down at the compass that hung around her neck and followed her husband into the deeper rainforest.

Fern sat in the middle of their day camp with a sigh and took her books from her bag.

"Why would anyone ever want to spend even a second of their day learning Latin?" She made a face, though she was the only person who might have seen it. "It's a language as dead as a dodo bird, or should I say, *Raphus cucullatus*, and that is as dead as dead can be. Extinct, even!" She chuckled at her own joke.

Fern picked up her Latin book and bent her head over the pictures, trying to will her brain to behave. But very quickly a familiar tingling feeling started in her fingers and toes, then moved towards the centre of her, refusing to go away.

Unable to ignore the call of curiosity for a second longer, Fern stood up. She could just glimpse her parents hard at work through the veil of green undergrowth. She knew they would be there for several hours. So she put her old desert hat on her head and set off to explore the rainforest herself.

## CHAPTER TWO

Fern knew things about plants that she hadn't learned from her dreaded textbooks. She knew that when plants were scared they could not run away like an animal could, but that some could shoot chemicals that smelled horrible to chase away predators. She had learned the hard way that others had nasty prickles or poisonous pollen, and she stayed away from those. When she cut herself she knew which plants healed, and when she stung herself she knew which plants soothed. Best of all, she knew which plants she could climb.

Seeing a rubber tree, she flung off her hateful boots, then slotted her grubby fingers and toes into the nooks of the trunk and quickly shimmied up it. While children in classrooms across the world studied how the Amazon River wiggled its way across a coloured map, Fern's geography lesson that day consisted of sitting in the treetop chewing on a melting chocolate bar she had discovered in her pocket, and spying on the sluggish, brownish, dullish Amazon River below.

There was a rustling in a nearby tree and a small face appeared between the leaves. It considered Fern for a moment, and then the monkey decided that she was no threat and joined her in making itself a small den. It was peaceful up here with just the monkey for company and Fern could see for miles and miles.

She followed the course of the river until her eye caught sight of a muddle of green spanning it like a line of emerald stepping stones. Feeling the tingle of curiosity again, and having left her binoculars behind at day camp, Fern decided she would just have the *smallest* peek at what was on the river, and then, she promised out loud, she would get straight back to her Latin verbs.

"Thank you for having me!" she said to the rubber tree and slid down its trunk.

The green stretching across the great river turned out to be a line of enormous lily pads. "What magnificent things you are. Like giant tea saucers with frilly purple edges. I wonder... I wonder if you could hold my weight? You certainly look strong enough. Perhaps I'll try stepping on the first of you and see."

Gently, Fern eased herself onto the enormous flat leaf. It didn't even dent! She bounced a couple of times, laughing at the feeling – it was like being on a floating trampoline. Feeling brave, she crept onto the next pad, and the next, and before she knew it, she was halfway across the river and could hardly see the bank she had started out from.

Finding the perfect pad on which to sit crosslegged and rest for a while, she watched dragonflies hover over the water like colourful helicopters. She was as hot as a hair dryer away from the cover of the trees, so she dangled her toes in the river for a moment, knowing that leaving them in too long might lead to them becoming a snack for a passing golden-flecked piranha fish.

A strange clicking noise made her jump. She turned and saw the black flash of a shiny shelled pollinating beetle hovering over one of the lily pads. "Don't land," she shouted at it. "You'll regret it!"

But it was too late. The beetle landed on the open flower of the lily and as Fern watched the flower closed its silken prison gates around it. She knew that the lily would hold it there for a whole day before releasing the insect to spread its pollen.

She leaned forward to listen to the worried rattle of the trapped beetle.

"Why do you hold onto them for so long?" Fern asked the plant. "Surely it could get the pollen quickly and you could let it go again? The poor thing sounds like it might have a heart attack, it's so scared."

Standing up quickly to see if she could help the beetle in any way, the lily pad seemed to tip in annoyance and she lost her balance and toppled forward into the cold water.

"Help," she gargled. "Hel-"

The 'p' was lost when she swallowed a whole cupful of smelly river water.

Moving from country to country every few weeks as her family had, Fern had never really learned to swim beyond a basic doggy paddle. As she started to sink, the long stems of the lily became wrapped around her legs and she struggled to kick.

With sudden clarity she could see she must be moments from running out of air – and that it was her own silly fault – but then her feet brushed the bottom and she managed to push off from the silty riverbed and break free of the lily stems. She popped up through the surface, gasping the fresh air gratefully and clinging to the edge of one of the pads.

The relief did not last long once she saw the eyeball. It was about two metres away, and looking straight at her. Fern didn't know as much about animals as she did about plants, but she was fairly sure that the eyeball, and the bubble-blowing nostril that now appeared next to it, belonged to a black caiman, a type of fearsome Amazonian crocodile that wasn't usually fussy about what was on the menu.

A second eye appeared, flecked with gold, and the caiman watched her unblinkingly, as if deciding whether she was worth the effort. Then, ever so slowly, it began to glide through the water towards her.

A scream rose in Fern's throat, but she knew there was no one near enough to hear. Instead, fear gave her the kick she needed and she managed to grab onto the next lily pad and pull herself out of the water. But the caiman rose from the river like a scaly rocket and launched itself forward – it wasn't going to give up that easily on a tasty-looking piece of lunch.

Fern flung herself desperately from one lily pad to another, hearing splashes behind her as the caiman rose again. Reaching the final lily pad, she rolled herself onto the shore just as the clatter of its giant jaws closed on thin air. Turning, she saw the creature's prehistoric head was so close that she could have reached out and touched it. But now she was on the riverbank, the caiman sank into the water again and disappeared silkily into the depths.

Fern lay for a moment looking up at the clouds spinning in the sky. Then she sat and funnelled the water out of her ears. Finding a long stick, she managed

to fish her floating hat from the river and put it back on her damp, matted hair. She nodded in gratitude to the lily pads, and was about to turn towards the camp when a long shadow fell over her. When Fern moves from the rainforest to the city, she feels entirely uprooted. But soon she meets a little plant that understands her every word, and things are looking up!

atten Di

That is until strange things start happening: giant lily pads on the Thames, monkey vines on the London Eye...

Can they solve this growing mystery – before it's too late?

"A PAGE-TURNER WITH OODLES OF HEART" SOPHIE KIRTLEY



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