

Lydia dumped her dusty case. Out on the patio, her daughters' bikes lay abandoned beside the jacaranda tree.

'Emma, Fleur,' she called out. 'Mummy's home.'

She stepped from the patio to glance down the pebble path that led to the long grass. As the sky darkened, an enormous moth, from the fringes of the jungle, smacked her in the cheek. She brushed its black dust off, then ducked back inside to escape the oncoming rain.

'Alec?' she called again. 'I'm home.'

Her husband's clean-cut features came to mind, skin smelling strongly of soap from the Chinese market, light brown hair cut short back and sides. There was no reply.

She fought off a pang of disappointment in the too-silent house. She'd sent a telegram, just as he'd asked; so where were her family? It was too hot to have gone for a walk. Were they at the pool perhaps, or maybe Alec had taken the girls for tea at the club?

She climbed the stairs to her bedroom, glanced at a photo of Emma and Fleur on the bedside table, and felt such a surge of love. She had missed them.

After undressing, she ran her fingers through her shoulder-length auburn hair, and flicked on the fan. Tired from the journey, and a month looking after a sick friend, she really needed a bath. She pulled open the wardrobe doors, stopped short, frowned. Her breath caught – none of Alec's clothes were there. Throwing on her loosely woven kimono, she ran barefoot to her daughters' room.

Someone had left their wardrobe open, and she saw, straight-away, that it was practically empty. Just a few pairs of roughly

folded shorts on the top shelf, and crumpled paper on the one beneath. Where were all of their clothes?

What if, she thought, but the sentence died in her throat. She steadied her breathing. That's what they want: the men in the jungle. To frighten us. She imagined what Alec would say: *Hold your head up. Don't let them win.* But what can you expect to feel, when they throw a grenade into a marketplace packed with people?

She spun round at the sound of a cry, and ran to the window. Her shoulders slumped. Just the flying foxes hanging in the tree.

With one hand on her heart, she slid her fingers under the crumpled lining paper in the wardrobe and pulled out one of Em's notebooks, hoping for a clue. She sat on the camphor wood chest, sniffed the comforting familiar smell, and clasped the notebook to her. She took a deep breath, then opened the notebook to read:

*The matriarch is a fat lady with a flabby neck. Her name is Harriet Parrott. She has raisin eyes and a shiny buttery nose which she tries to hide with powder. She slides on little feet in Chinese slippers, but wears long skirts, so you can only just see them at the edges.*

Harriet. Had they gone to Harriet?

She stopped abruptly, grasped the edge of the chest, reeling from a rush of heat and the panic that was rising in her. Too much was missing. A note. Of course. He must have left a note. Or a message with the servants.

She ran downstairs two at a time, missing her footing, diving into the downstairs rooms: living rooms, kitchen, scullery, the covered corridor to the servants' day quarters, and the storehouses. Just a couple of abandoned crates remained, everywhere was dark and empty, the servants gone. No amah's rocking chair, no cook's day bed, all the gardener's tools removed. She scanned the room – no note.

She listened to the rain and, biting a fingernail, racked her

brain, hardly able to think for air so heavy it weighed her down. She pictured her journey back home, hours squashed against the jammed train window, a hand cupped over her nose. The pungent odour of vomit from a sickly Indian boy. The distant gunfire.

She doubled over, winded by their absence. Fought for breath. This couldn't be. She was tired. She wasn't thinking straight. There had to be a rational explanation. There had to be. Alec would have found a way to tell her if they'd had to leave. Wouldn't he?

She swivelled round and called their names, '*Emma, Fleur.*' She choked back a sob and pictured Fleur's dimpled chin, blue eyes, fair hair parted with a bow. Then, recalling the jungle mists that concealed desperate men, her worst fear overtook any remaining chance of rational hope. Sweat crawled under her kimono, her eyes began to smart and she covered her mouth with her palm.

With trembling hands she picked up the phone to dial Alec's boss. He'd know what had happened. He'd tell her what to do.

Then, she sat with the phone in her lap, sweat growing cold on her skin, flies humming overhead, the sound of the fan churning, click, click, click, and the flutter of a moth's wings beating the air. The line was dead.