

CHAPTER 1

February, 1942. Batavia, Island of Java, Dutch East Indies.

A peacock eating cake is not something you see every day. But at Violet's garden parties, anything can happen.

The vain creature struts across the perfectly manicured lawn toward its next victim—a little boy with an enormous slice of chocolate cake teetering on the edge of a floppy paper plate.

The monkeys sense a feast too. They chatter and leap in the trees above the buffet table, making the leaves shake. They've got their eyes on the towering jello that's melting miserably in the heat, although the sweaty cupcakes, wilting sandwiches, or dissolving crepes will do just as nicely. European party food in the tropics. How silly. Pound cake and fruit skewers would have lasted much better in this heat, but the monkeys aren't fussy. A servant patrols the table, slingshot in hand. Monkeys aren't afraid of people, but if you aim a slingshot at them, they skedaddle.

I feel like I am melting, too, just like the ridiculous food. That's the thing with living on the equator—it's always hot and humid. Wearing European-style party clothes in Asia is the worst idea ever. My dress is scratchy, my long socks make my legs prickle, and my feet feel as if they're about to explode out of my shoes. All I want to do is kick them off and sink my toes into the soft grass. I can't wait to be back in my cool cotton dress. The fact that it's the monsoon season and could rain at any moment hasn't put Violet off having her birthday party outside. She's used to having things her way, and everyone had better do as they're told, even the weather.

I'd rather eat a rotten mango buzzing with flies than suffer through this party, but Papa said we had to come because Violet's father is a very important man in the government. I think that's supposed to impress people, but it doesn't impress me. Mr. Brederode only ever talks about three things: how popular coconuts are in Europe, how much a barrel of oil costs, and whether the war in Europe will ever reach the Dutch East Indies now that Germany and Japan are on the same side. I don't think I've ever seen him smile.

"That silly peacock is terrorizing people again," a voice behind me says.

I spin around, and there is my best friend, Bakti, grinning at me.

"What are you doing here?" I whisper, glancing around. "If Violet sees you, there'll be trouble."

Bakti's been my best friend since I was seven, when his mom, *Ibu Lia*, came to work for us. He taught me how to spear a fish, how to dive down to where the rainbow coral grows, and how to climb a coconut tree. He's a bit older than me, but if the wind's behind me, I can almost run as fast as him. Almost. He's never liked Violet, and I don't blame him because she's nothing but mean to us.

"Oh please, she's as scary as a toothless piranha." He puffs out his chest and stands even taller, but I see him scan the garden.

The peacock sidles closer to the little boy and his chocolate cake. It spreads its magnificent tail fan, its feathers shimmering emerald, sapphire, gold, and amethyst in the bright afternoon sun.

"Oh! Watch out, little boy!" I exclaim. But it's too late. The peacock lunges. The boy shrieks, throwing his plate up in the air. The cake arches gracefully, then lands on the grass with a splat, and the peacock gets its feast.

“See! What did I tell you?” Violet has wafted over while our backs were turned. She’s wearing her best blue dress and new white satin gloves. Now that she’s eleven, Violet thinks she’s all grown up and can do silly things like wear elbow-length gloves in this heat just because it’s fashionable in Europe.

“Pfft,” I say, pursing my lips. “You haven’t told us anything, Violet. You’ve only just come over.”

She narrows her blue eyes at me, and her nose twitches, like a snarl. “Willem Shakespeare is simply the best-looking peacock in the whole city of Batavia.” Violet has a way of making everything she says sound like an absolute fact, even when she’s talking nonsense. “*Pa* brought him back from *India*, you know. A gift from Lord Mountbatten, the *Viceroy*.”

I stare at her flatly. “You know it’s William Shakespeare, right?”

Without taking her eyes off me, she says, “No servants in the garden. Unless you’ve got a tray in your hands.” She doesn’t look at Bakti, but we both know she’s talking to him.

I feel a rush of irritation at her rudeness. “You should be careful your face doesn’t turn as ugly as your words.”

Violet smirks, and when I look at Bakti, I see why. He is staring at the ground, as if willing it to open up and swallow him whole.

I could kill her.

Bakti used to swat Violet’s rude comments away like they were annoying mosquitoes. But not anymore, not since he turned thirteen and became *extra* sensitive to everything. Now, her words sting.

“This letter came for you,” Bakti mumbles, rubbing the top of his ear. He holds an envelope out to me. “*Ibu* said it’s important, that you’d want to open it straightaway.”

He speaks Dutch, overpronouncing every word, and I know it’s because Violet is listening. He’s always so worried about his accent, even though he speaks Dutch perfectly well. Something inside me twinges, like a pulled muscle. If *she* wasn’t here, we’d speak Melayu, his own language. But Violet can’t understand Melayu. Or doesn’t want to.

I stare at the envelope in his hand. My mouth is suddenly bone dry, Violet’s party fades into the background, and all I can hear is a whooshing sound pulsing in my ears.

“Well? Aren’t you going to open this very important letter?” Violet’s trying to sound like she doesn’t really care, but I know she’s dying to know what it is.

I don’t need to open it. I already know what it is.

“Just give her a minute,” Bakti says.

“Don’t you have some snakes to look for or something?” Violet snaps in his direction.

I take the letter from him with trembling hands and shove it behind my back. “I’m sure it’s nothing,” I say, my voice shaking. “I’ll open it at home.”

Violet’s eyes grow wide. “Wait, is that *the* letter? From the fancy singing school?” Her voice rises excitedly. “After *all* this time?”

Before I can stop her, she lunges behind me and grabs the envelope. She flips it over in her hands as if tossing a *pannenkoek* in a frying pan.

“Ooh, feels heavy . . . must be good news.” She scans the garden, then smiles at me wickedly. Next thing I know, she’s dragging me across the lawn toward the grand piano standing on a raised platform in the middle of the garden. “Everybody,” she calls, “may I have your attention please.”

“Violet, no,” I hiss, trying to wrench free. People are already staring at us, curious about what the birthday girl has to say. Someone even taps their cake fork against their champagne

glass. I look pleadingly back at Bakti, but he can't do a thing to help. If he tries, he'll be the one in trouble.

We reach the piano, and a hush descends.

"Ladies and gentlemen, our dear Emmeline has just had a letter with some wonderful news—"

My stomach plummets. *What is she doing?*

"—and in celebration she would like to perform a song for us." The glee in her voice is sickening.

The crowd murmurs their approval.

Violet clicks her gloved fingers at the sweaty pianist. "Play."

"Play what, Miss Violet?" he says, looking every bit as terrified as I feel.

"Doesn't matter," Violet says through gritted teeth. "She can sing anything."

I feel like I'm going to pass out. "Violet, please," I whisper, panic catching in my throat. "You know I can't do this."

"Of course you can," Violet says. "You sang last year with your mother, didn't you?"

The pianist is already rushing through the introduction to a song, and Violet strides away smugly. When I don't start singing, there's an awkward silence. The pianist plays the introduction again, slower this time. He does an exaggerated nod when I'm supposed to come in.

I scan the crowd desperately for Papa, but I can't see him anywhere. What I *can* see is a sea of faces staring at me. I know some of them—they were here last year, too, when I sang with Mama. Now pity knits their brows and settles heavy on their downturned mouths. *Poor Emmy, why won't she sing?* A group of boys and girls from my class snigger to each other behind their hands. Their sideways glances cut like knives. I spot Bakti standing at the back, fists balled up, a grim look on his face. It's hard to breathe. Darkness creeps in from the corners of my eyes, and I back away from the piano.

Just as I am about to run, there is a commotion up at the house. Someone shrieks, and everyone turns to look, including me. Mrs. Brederode, Violet's ma, comes hurtling along the terrace, clutching her sunhat to her head. She almost trips down the wide stone steps but manages to steady herself on one of the two giant marble lions stretched out at the bottom. She comes running toward us, red in the face and wagging her hand out in front of her as if she's hailing a *betjak* taxi.

"We're doomed," she wails, collapsing dramatically on the lawn. The rest of her message is heard only by those gathered around fanning her.

Bakti sprints over to me. "You okay?"

I shrug miserably, my cheeks still burning. *Okay* is the very last thing I feel. "What's happened?"

He shakes his head. "No idea. I couldn't hear."

We watch as Mrs. B's news ripples around the garden. It must be serious because the men hurry inside and the women whisper in shock.

"Emmy!" Papa rushes down from the house and across the garden toward us. "There you are. Come on, we're going home." He nods at Bakti, his face creased with worry.

All around us people are leaving, their plates and glasses strewn across the lawn. The monkeys are ransacking the food table, squabbling over fistfuls of jello and unraveled crepes. But all I can think about is that my humiliation is finally over.

"Emmy, did you hear me?" Papa shakes me gently so that I focus on him. "The Japanese have invaded Singapore. Everyone's saying they're coming for us next."

CHAPTER 2

At home, Papa goes straight into his study, slamming the door closed behind him.

Bakti and I kick our shoes off on the mat at the front door.

“I must tell *Ibu* what’s happened,” Bakti says, going off toward the kitchen to find his mom.

I cross our small entrance hall and press my ear to the study door so I can eavesdrop on Papa. He’s making a telephone call; I can hear the click and whirl of the phone as he dials. When the person answers, Papa doesn’t even say hello, just: “Have you heard?”

I catch snippets of the conversation. “They mean business this time,” “stronger than we thought,” and “catastrophic.”

When Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii a year ago, no one could believe it. And even when they invaded Hong Kong on Christmas Day, Papa had been worried, but he hadn’t reacted like this. This time is different. I strain to hear more, nibbling at a bit of dry skin on my bottom lip.

Bakti comes back. He holds out my crumpled letter. “Here, I almost forgot. Violet dropped it in all the confusion.”

I hadn’t forgotten. I’ve been dreading this letter every day for almost a year, ever since Mama . . .

I take the envelope and turn it over to look at the return address on the back. *Marlborough School for Girls. Kent. United Kingdom.* My stomach lurches.

“That girl’s worse than a durian fruit,” Bakti mutters. “Get too close and you realize she stinks.”

I smile thinly.

“I shouldn’t have given it to you in front of her,” he says. “It’s just—I panicked. She makes me feel so stupid.” He slumps down on to the floor next to the study door, his back against the wall.

I want to carry on listening to what Papa is saying, but I sit down next to him, the hall tiles cool on the backs of my legs. “You’re not stupid. She’s just mean, and always will be.”

Ibu Lia comes out of the kitchen, and I quickly tuck the letter under the folds of my dress. She gives me a bowl of mango sprinkled with paprika, just the way I like it. “Are you all right, child?” she asks gently. “Bakti told me what happened.”

I’m not sure if she’s talking about the Japanese invading Singapore, or what Violet did to me at her party, so I just nod. *Ibu Lia* glances at the study door. “Come eat in the kitchen. Your father will find you when he’s ready.”

“I think I’ll stay here,” I say. If I get up now, she’ll definitely see the letter. “Thank you for the mango though.”

Ibu Lia pauses, and for a moment I think she’s going to insist. But she says, “I’ll be in the garden if you need me.” She pads back into the kitchen, and I hear the side door to the garden click shut behind her.

I shove the letter into my pocket. “I’m not opening it, you know.”

Bakti pops a chunk of mango in his mouth and shrugs. “Doesn’t matter what it says. It’s bad news for me either way.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you got in, you’ll leave.” His words hang between us. “And if you didn’t get in, I’ll have to put up with you being miserable.”

I smile weakly. “Well, I’ve already decided. Whatever the letter says, I’m not going. You saw what happened at Violet’s party. I’m useless. And anyway, I don’t want to go anymore.”

Bakti licks his sticky fingers. “You’re not useless. You just need a bit more time, that’s all.”

I’m about to tell him no amount of time will make things better, when there’s a sharp knock at the front door, and Mr. Thompson lets himself in. Mr. Thompson works at Papa’s rice exporting business and comes over for supper at least once a week, especially since his wife got sunstroke and had to go back to England to recover. Bakti thinks it had nothing to do with sunstroke, and everything to do with the fact that she never liked living in Batavia in the first place.

Mr. Thompson takes off his hat and dabs his forehead with a handkerchief. He nods at us gravely and heads straight for the study, knocks twice and goes in leaving the door ajar. It’s easier to hear what they’re saying now, so I get to my feet, pulling Bakti up with me, and we put our ears as close to the gap as we dare.

Mr. Thompson is speaking. “—always known it was just a matter of time. The Nazis control most of Europe, and with Hitler allied with Hirohito, the Japanese will be looking to expand their empire. We’ve watched them take island by island since January. Now their confidence is up, they’ll turn their sights on Batavia. It’s the oil fields they’re after, you mark my words. You can’t win a war without oil.”

“But they said the British army in Singapore was unbeatable.” Papa sounds exhausted. “How on earth did the Japanese overpower them so quickly? It makes me doubt our Royal Dutch Army stands a chance against them. I just can’t believe this is happening.”

Mr. Thompson murmurs in agreement. “The British army has enough on their plates trying to stop the Germans from crossing the channel. They can’t defend their colonies too. They already lost Hong Kong over Christmas, and with the Netherlands occupied by the Nazis, the Dutch can’t exactly come to our rescue, can they?”

“My god, you’re right,” Papa says. “The Japanese are so close, why would they stop now? It would take their destroyers less than a day at sea to reach Batavia from Singapore. We’re sitting ducks out here.”

“We have to get out.” Mr. Thompson is almost whispering, and I have to strain to hear.

“You mean leave Batavia?” Papa sounds incredulous. “But what about the business? We’d lose everything.”

“There won’t *be* a business when the war reaches us. Surely, you see that?” Mr. Thompson’s voice rises with urgency.

“I will not simply pack it all in at the first hint of trouble,” Papa says, his voice rising too. “I’ve worked too hard, lost too much already.”

“All right. All right.” Mr. Thompson sounds like he’s trying to calm Papa down. “At least think about sending Emmy to safety while you take care of things here. It’s for the best, John. We have no idea how bad things are going to get.” He pauses, then says softly, “What if she’s . . . taken?”

I grip the doorframe hard and look at Bakti, who stares back wide-eyed.

“Taken?” I hear Papa say. “Don’t be absurd! She’s only a child. Of course she won’t be taken.”

“And what if we’re called up? If we all go off to fight, will it really be safe for the women and children left behind? You can’t leave Emmy here alone.”

I can hear Papa pacing. I wait for him to tell Mr. Thompson that he's wrong, that Batavia is our home and we are safe right here, where we belong, with our friends and our house and everything we know. I wait for him to say that he'll never send me away.

But he doesn't say any of that. Instead, he says, "I suppose the best thing would be for her to go to that singing school in Kent. We should have heard from them by now. Trouble is, she's not keen on it anymore, and after everything that's happened, I wasn't going to force the matter. I hoped she'd come round on her own."

He pauses. I lean closer, holding my breath.

"But an invasion changes everything," Papa sighs. "Tomorrow's Monday. I'll telegram them, explain the situation, give them a nudge. I could follow her to England once I know the business is safe."

I feel like I've been punched in the stomach. He hasn't mentioned Marlborough in such a long time, I thought he'd forgotten all about it. I thought I could just throw the letter away without even opening it, and that I'd stay in Batavia forever. I thrust my hand into my pocket and scrunch the letter up in my fist. This blasted war is ruining everything.

Bakti lets out a long breath. "Sounds like he's set on you going after all."

The thought of going to Marlborough is bad enough, but saying goodbye to the only home I can really remember, to Bakti, to *Ibu Lia* . . . to Mama, to *everything*?

No. I won't do it.

I barge into the study. "I am *not* leaving. And you can't make me!"

The look on Papa's face when he realizes I've heard everything is almost enough to make me run to him. But I stand firm, glowering in the doorway. Mr. Thompson clears his throat, makes his excuses, and leaves, shutting the study door behind him.

"Emmy, darling, I'm sorry you heard all that," Papa says, wiping a hand over his face.

"Are you really going to send me away?"

"If that's what it takes to keep you safe."

"But why?" The cold anger from a moment ago melts to sloshy fear. Papa looks dead serious.

"Because barring some miracle, the war is coming. The Japanese have never been this close, and if they can take Singapore, there isn't much hope for Batavia. I'll follow just as soon as I can."

Even though he's standing right there, he feels very far away.

"But we're not at war yet . . . can't we just wait and see what happens?" I beg.

Papa crosses the room and hugs me tightly, kissing the top of my head. His crumpled shirt smells musty. I don't hug him back.

"We can't risk it, darling. The best thing to do now is to get you to England and into Marlborough. I'm going to send a telegram tomorrow afternoon, see if we can't get an answer either way."

I push him away, guarding the letter in my pocket. "I know. I heard. I don't want to go there anymore." Anxiety swirls in the pit of my stomach.

Papa looks at me closely. "But Marlborough has always been your dream."

"Not anymore," I say, swallowing the lump in my throat.

Papa flops down onto the old leather couch beside the window. It exhales under his weight. He takes off his glasses and rubs the red marks they've made on the bridge of his nose. He always does that when he's stressed.

I hold my breath. I think I've convinced him . . .

But he shakes his head. "I know things have been hard this past year. But you can't just give up on your dream. I won't let you."

"That's not what this is about! I just don't want to go anymore."

"I know leaving will be hard, but if the war comes and something happens to you . . . you're all I have left in the world . . ." His voice trails off.

I give him my worst death stare. "I'm all you have left, but that won't stop you from sending me halfway across the world, against my will. *Alone?*"

Papa winces, and I know I've hurt him. "It's war, Emmy. Difficult decisions have to be made. You'll understand one day."

"I will never understand." My voice cracks. "What you're doing is cruel and a hundred times worse than the war."

It's all too much. I run from the room, tears splashing on the floor as I go.

CHAPTER 3

In my bedroom, I lock the door and throw myself onto my bed.

How can Papa even think of sending me away? I wish Mama was here. She'd talk sense into him. But if Mama was here, maybe I'd still want to go to Marlborough.

I pull the crumpled envelope out of my pocket and run my fingers over the bumpy embossed emblem on the front.

Marlborough School for Girls. The best singing school in England.

It was Mama's idea for me to apply. I can still remember when we did the application form last year. We were out there, on the veranda, and the monsoon rain came down so hard that the edges of the paper began to curl, and we had to run inside. We laughed so much.

That was a whole year ago. And now I finally have my answer.

Except now, everything is different—I don't sing anymore.

No, not don't. *Can't.*

Not since Mama died.

I don't care what the letter says anyway. I'm not going, and Papa can't make me . . . can he? Trouble is, this time I don't think any amount of begging will convince him to let me stay. Of course . . . if I didn't get in, all my problems would be solved.

There's only one way to settle this once and for all.

I have to open the letter.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

Slowly, I peel back the edge of the envelope and wiggle my finger into the hole. My hands shake as I rip the envelope, tearing jagged edges along the top. I slip the letter out and flip it open, my eyes racing ahead to read what it says.

Dear Miss Abendanon,

Thank you for considering Marlborough School for Girls. After reviewing your application and references, we are delighted to offer you a place.

Congratulations.

Please find enclosed our uniform list and term dates.

Warm regards,

Mrs. Guildwaite

Headmistress

“No,” I whisper, scanning the letter again. “No!”

I got in. *I got in.* My breath comes in shaky gasps. This can't be happening. Could I hide the letter from Papa, pretend it never came, like I was going to do all along? No, that won't work. He's going to send a telegram to Marlborough tomorrow, so he'll find out I've been accepted anyway.

I throw the letter to the bottom of my bed as if it's just bitten me. My mind races. Will the war really come to Batavia? The grown-ups all think so, but how do they actually know? All this time, the war has seemed so far away. It was something that *might* happen, but probably wouldn't, like catching a cold from sucking an ice cube, or swallowing a spider if you fall asleep with your mouth open. It's just a story, not something that can actually happen. So there's still a chance this will all blow over, Japan won't invade us, and I can stay in Batavia. Right?

A faint tapping at my door interrupts my thoughts, and I hear Papa's low voice. “Emmy, love. Can I come in?”

I chew my bottom lip so I don't call out to him. The last thing I need is for him to find out about Marlborough. I take deep breaths to slow my breathing, but a knot writhes in my stomach like a trapped snake.

Papa tries the doorknob. It creaks as it turns, but the door doesn't budge. I hear him sigh as he realizes it's locked. There is a long pause, then he retreats down the passage.

I lie on my bed for a long time, thinking. I need a plan, a way out of going to Marlborough. But what? When I get tired of thinking on my bed, I go and stare out the window. The late afternoon light casts long shadows across the veranda, and the sky glows pink-orange. It didn't rain today, after all. A day of no rain during the monsoon season is bad luck. That's what *Ibu Lia* says anyway. Maybe if it rains, this whole horrid day will be washed away.

I gaze out over the garden. There used to be a wild overgrown area where the wispy grass reached past my knees. But when Mama died, Papa ripped it all out and put down lawn and a gravel path instead. I stare at the winding path now, curling from the veranda through the garden to Bakti and *Ibu Lia*'s hut, and the old rambutan tree beyond.

My heart feels heavy. I don't want to leave my home.

I drum my fingers on the windowsill. Papa said he'll send a telegram to Marlborough tomorrow afternoon. What if . . . ?

I feel a plan coming together.

What if I send a telegram first, telling them I am not accepting the place? Then, when the headmistress gets Papa's telegram, she'll either ignore it altogether or write back to clarify. Either way, the confusion will buy me some time, and by then the whole war thing might have blown over and I can stay in Batavia. It's worth a shot, at least.

I've never sent a telegram before, but how hard could it be? I could sneak out of school after lunch and go to the telegram office. It's not very far. I'll only miss art, and Mrs. Jonker is so clueless, she probably won't even notice I'm not there.

Buoyed with a new sense of hope, I sit at my desk and start drafting the telegram. It has to be short. And sound grown-up. Decisive, so Mrs. Guildwaite won't even think of questioning it.

I write it over and over, until it's just right. Evening falls, and my room grows dark. Outside, the crickets begin to chirp, and the air is thick with the scent of frangipani flowers. Finally, I am done. I wriggle out of my dress and put on my nightie. Then I shake out my covers and clamber into bed. Reaching under my pillow, I pull out Mama's favorite turquoise cardigan

and hug it to my chest. A tiny flicker of hope dances where before there was only dread. My plan will work. It has to.

Mosquitoes dive bomb past my ear with their high-pitched whine, and I swat them away before reaching up to unknit the mosquito net tied to a ring on the ceiling. It cascades over my bed like a waterfall. Mosquitoes can kill you here. Loads of animals can. Like scorpions, stone fish, poisonous frogs, rabid dogs, and monkeys, even tigers in the jungle. And snakes, of course. I quickly learned to shake out my shoes before putting them on and to pat down the covers before getting into bed, because you never know what's lurking in the dark.

I toss and turn for the rest of the night, tormented by the whine of hungry mosquitoes. Pictures of soldiers and bomber planes race through my head, blurring into dreams of unsent telegrams and Violet's disastrous party.

At dawn, the clear, looping call of the koel bird pierces the silence.

Kuu-oo. Kuu-oo.

When the early morning light creeps over my windowsill, I dress quickly, eager to get on with the school day so I can slip away to the telegram office. I brush my teeth at my sink then slink to the kitchen, hoping Bakti will be ready to walk me to school early.

Instead, I find *Ibu Lia*, who wordlessly smooths down my hair and gives me a banana. My eyes dart to the kitchen door and, reading my mind, she says, "Bakti has gone to the market to find out more about what happened yesterday."

I nod, feeling a bit disappointed that I'll have to walk to school by myself. On the other hand, the market spreads news faster than any newspaper, so Bakti might find out something useful about the war.

I slip out without saying goodbye to Papa. Our street is eerily quiet, as though the turmoil of last night has not yet spilled into the outside world. I tuck the corner of my white blouse into my blue tartan skirt. My skin prickles from the heat already and I'm barely out the door. The telegram is in one pocket, and the letter from Marlborough lies heavy in the other—no way am I going to leave it at home for Papa or *Ibu Lia* to find, so it's staying with me until I figure out how to get rid of it once and for all.

Doubt skitters through my mind. What if my plan doesn't work?

Monsoon rain clouds gather in the distance. All around me, nothing has changed, but everything is different, as though something more threatening than rain is in the air.