

# CATCHING LEGENDS

## Chapter 1

A publisher's office in downtown Brisbane, Queensland. 2015

Reader,

If you are looking for a simple story, then this tale is not for you. Because what Alfredo de Faino told me in my office defies belief. And yet, you couldn't make that stuff up. As much as I have been able to check what he showed me, it fits the historical records.

I am a publisher of quality stories. We, in the book trade, are always very suspicious of people who tell history without disclosing their sources. I go through everything very carefully... and, surprisingly, I am feeling fairly confident to share Alfredo's tale with you. It's just that it is so bizarre.

But then, history has always turned on the small hinges of chance. What if the former British prime minister, Winston Churchill, had not survived the 1899 Boer attack on his train in Natal – before he had a chance to shine forty years later, leading the World War 2 efforts? What if Archduke Franz Ferdinand's driver hadn't taken a wrong turn in Sarajevo in 1914 – then World War 1 might never have started? What if a British spy, William Maclean, had not written a coded diary, which would blow open a secret story of missing Scottish children?

I am staring at the cutting from the Courier and Advertiser as I write this. It was published in Dundee, Scotland, in September 1962:

### ***Tayport children still missing at Chesterhill***

The baffling mystery of the two missing Tayport children continues a week after they were separated from their group while going to explore the Hermit's Cave at Chesterhill, a few miles behind the town.

Carolyn Moore and Douglas Ramsay, both aged 10, were part of group of six children playing at the burn below Chesterhill last Saturday. They had apparently climbed the slope to where a cave is set in a low cliff face.

It is known as the Hermit's Cave but has had no residency in recent times. It looks over the valley where the burn flows off the hill.

The children were reported missing to the Tayport police at 7pm last Saturday. Police and family members immediately conducted a search in the remaining hours of daylight.

Only one clue has been found, a handwritten pocket notebook page, under a rock on the flat ground above the cave. It appears to have been written by Douglas Ramsay. It read, 'Shouted for help. C can't climb down the cliff. Heading to town the back way. D.'

The back ways to Tayport could mean passing through Scotsraig farm or by an old track known as The Serpentine which comes out on the main Tayport-Newport road.

Despite detailed police investigations, no-one at the farm or on the main road has seen anything.

Organised searches by local volunteer groups and police have revealed nothing. The children are reliable. Surely if they had met with an accident, some trace would be found? Police are baffled by this case of lost children.

I have no time for conspiracy sensations. A lot of history is complex; deliberately 'not known'. In principle, we know that. It is kept under wraps – part of the official secrets of nations and the spies who collect the information. They hover in a clandestine world of deceit, lies and intimidation.

Some of Alfredo's story has been passed on by word of mouth, particularly the Aboriginal parts. But, just because it is an oral record – told by Elders down through the generations – shouldn't make it any less truthful than, say, the self-serving stories of victors in war; their moulding of what actually happened into cultural narratives; legends, if you like.

Because, that is another part of what Alfredo told me. It concerns what happened to plundered treasure in Singapore and the Philippines while the Japanese forces occupied those lands in the Second World War. More than that though – the particular piece of missing treasure was a golden artefact, a tiny statuette known as the Suci Kancil, hundreds of years old, which goes back to the early settlement of the area known as Malaysia today.

The story of what happened to the wartime treasure has been written, as I have discovered, by the very people who might want to influence how the

events were to be remembered. The key players are long dead but, for Alfredo's part of the story, the evidence points to Queensland.

So, will you buy into the story that Alfredo told me? How he and his girlfriend Julia Tsai, both teenagers at the time, set out to solve a puzzle of two ten-year-olds who went missing in a Scottish fishing village in 1962? How those children were never heard of again? That search took Alfredo and Julia into exploring the world of British spies in the Cold War – that 1950s and 60s nuclear stand-off between the Soviet Union and the United States – and an agent called William Maclean.

Maclean's diary then led them into the traditional Aboriginal lands of Queensland's Central Highlands, looking for clues to hidden Japanese loot from the war. Then it became even more complicated as Alfredo and Julia followed the trail in 2008 to Singapore and got caught up in a murder – no; murders, plural – all because of the Suci Kancil.

Alfredo, today, is a news reporter here in Australia. When he gave me his draft manuscript of what he said had happened, I was skeptical – but when I started to investigate it, it was shiver up the spine stuff.

He has chosen to tell the tale through the eyes of the actual people who were living it. As he said, 'I have just stood in the shoes of those who lived those experiences.'

So is it fact – or is it legend?

How much of what we accept to be true has been embellished over time or manipulated to suit someone's view of history?

Reader, this is not my story. I am using Alfredo's rough draft, along with what he told me. It is presented in the style he has chosen. Where necessary, I have had to tidy up the grammar and some spellings but what you will read is essentially what Alfredo gave me.

So, be prepared to read this adventure through multiple perspectives – and when you do, I'm sure you will be drawn in as I was; stunned as the strands inexorably come together in such a surprising manner.

To compound your challenge, Alfredo starts his manuscript near the finish with himself and Julia in Brisbane, Australia, in 2008. It is he who is telling the story from now on; but do not fear, you will be coming back to me!

## Chapter 2

Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. 20 October 2008

‘What secrets could that face tell?’

Peeking out of its bubble-wrap, the tiny golden head stared mysteriously at us; the Suci Kancil, itself... the Sacred Mouse-Deer of Malay legend.

Julia bowed towards it, solemn, respectful. ‘It’s not just caves and your great-uncle Bill, is it? My mother’s history is laced through this too.’ Her eyes were dark pools. ‘It’s like a girl’s hair. *Tóufà biànze*, we say in Chinese. How you say it in English? Plaits? The story weaves like the plaits of hair.’

The sanctuary of my humble Mount Gravatt unit was being penetrated by very perplexing thoughts.

‘Weird, isn’t it, Alfredo?’ Her eyes were searching my face... begging for meaning. If she was confused, so was I. But I played it safe with my *I’m listening intelligently* expression.

‘Coincidence?’ I offered lamely.

I should be really clever – eighteen-year-old uni student; smart as, at least to the outside world – not out of my depth like this...but hey..?

Because we now knew how it had all started; long before our parents were even born; before Singapore, before we had heard of the Suci Kancil, missing Scottish children or stolen wartime treasure.

‘No.’ She shook her head slowly. ‘Can’t be coincidence.’ Her flowing black hair was moving absently in a way that always affected me. ‘All so linked. And the three caves are a common thread: the wartime tunnel in the Philippines, the hermit’s old home in Scotland and the Aboriginal burial ground in Central Queensland.’ Her hand squeezed her forehead for inspiration. ‘Oooh!’

She looked at me, hinting a smile... her plea for me to ease her stress.

I may be fit and strong but answers to complexity were more her field. She would find the solution, I would nod wisely and then... the pleasures of life and love would comfort us both.

‘History is majorly weird, Julia.’ My best attempt at a deep thought.

But her eyes were travelling far away. She had picked up my late great-uncle's well-thumbed diary again. 'How must it have been so long ago?'

'Just imagine it,' I encouraged. I was really trying hard. 'We know what happened. We could almost have been there. Uncle Bill has cleared the mists of time for us – like shadows of the past.'

Her eyes glazed.

They say we can't picture the bygone eras, but *we* could – as clear as – in our mind's eye. It was coming alive through my great-uncle Bill's diary from the memorabilia box, plus all that research we'd done; and eventually being part of so much of the mystery.

Her voice sounded trance-like. 'Yes, the first cave was on Luzon island in the Philippines.'

'20 October 1944, World War 2,' I agreed.

'I can see the guide,' she continued, 'with a damp lock of hair falling over his forehead, twisting his head backwards to stare, horrified, at the soldier in the dirty olive uniform and... the dead body of his fellow Filipino porter.' She winced at the thought.

'Then,' I suggested, 'he might have turned to face the neatly-dressed officer in front, feeling all confused. They had done everything asked of them. They had shown the two Nipponese soldiers to the secret cave. They had carried and hidden the boxes as instructed.'

She stared at me, her beautiful face living the man's pain. 'I can see his eyes, pleading silently for mercy.'

'But it was all for nothing,' I shrugged in frustration. 'The officer would have nodded slightly and watched the soldier raise his sword behind the submissive native.'

Julia bowed her head. 'Then the steel blade would have arced towards that poor kneeling man.'

We looked at each other silently for a couple of seconds before I spoke, 'Cruel, what they did – even though it was wartime.' I reached out for her hand. 'Different times.' I tried to dismiss the image for her. 'Then they set the charges for the explosion.'

‘And, when it happened, the cave entrance was sealed with rock, leaving only the small sign outside to mark the spot in ancient Kungi characters.’

I was picturing the cave on the island of Luzon, with its pile of rubble blocking the entrance. ‘So close to the end of the war, too. That was the date when radios on the other side of the island were picking up the American General MacArthur saying, *People of the Philippines, I have returned.*’

She nodded absently... and then sparked into the story again.

‘The second part of the thread was after the Scottish children had visited the Hermit’s Cave.’

‘22 September 1962. What are you seeing?’ I asked.

She was looking at me... but her mind was distant behind the eyes – imagining, living the story.

Her voice sounded dreamy, unearthly, as if she was lost in an hypnotic haze. ‘I see Douglas feeling the boat roll in the gentle North Sea swell, off the east coast of Scotland. He couldn’t move or speak. Strange voices swirled around him. The big man had carried him and the sleeping Carolyn up a gangplank from the smelly fishing drifter.’

‘Then,’ I prompted. ‘Uncle Bill was saying, *Stay quiet. I’m a friend.*’

‘Yes. Yes. That’s right.’ She paused again, her eyes refocusing to the present. ‘Now, on to the final stage of the thread. Mount Moffatt, here in Queensland. The third cave.’ With a sudden warm smile, her upturned face stared at me, no longer far away in misty memories – but drawing me into her thoughts. ‘You were there, Alfredo. I remember the date. 10 January 2007.’

‘I was. Yes.’ My mind was picturing that hot dry sandstone cave in Central Queensland... and the big Aboriginal man, Boonja Doyle, showing me the faded Asian symbols on the broken packing-case slat.

It all fitted with Uncle Bill’s story.

I could hear Boonja’s deep voice echoing in my head, saying, *These are human remains. See.* His torch was lightening the gloom as he spoke and it caused a scurrying at the back of the cave. *Been there a long time; animals have been in. Scattered. Chewed.* He pointed at the footwear. *Not an Aussie working boot, that.*

Julia knew the story. I had told her at the time.

‘The Borneo coin.’ She reminded me. ‘A 1930 coin. It could only have come from the treasure boxes.’

‘Yes. Like Boonja said, *The mob from Borneo sure as hell haven’t been here in the Queensland Sandstone Belt*, as if his Murri logic was the solution to the whole thing.’

‘So I’m right, Alfredo. Am I not?’ her expression seeking reassurance, as she spoke. ‘The three caves link this puzzle. And *you* are right too. There are shadows of the past definitely moving through our lives. I think I am getting it.’

I cuddled my arm around her shoulders. Her tension was starting to relax.

The storage box of William Maclean, my great-uncle Bill, lay with all its memories at our feet.

I tried a grin and a cheery comment. ‘At any moment, I’m expecting more surprises to leap out of that box, sucking us into another adventure.’

But Julia shuddered at the thought. She threw her hands up in a gesture of amazed horror at my flippancy.

‘But these aren’t just stories, though, Alfredo. Are they?’ Something was certainly niggling away at her, just beyond her grasp. ‘This is not someone’s fairy tale. This has been real. Murders too. Current murders. Unbelievable, if we hadn’t seen and lived it for ourselves.’

I followed the example my father had taught me over the years; mouth closed and my face listening.

She had strewn the pictures that my mother had copied from Douglas, onto the laminated coffee table in front of us. Along with my little piece of sacred sandstone from the Central Queensland cave, and Lim Najib Tong’s photos which Inspector Lee had forwarded from Singapore.

Eventually, I suggested, ‘We have the pieces of the puzzle, Julia. Don’t we?’

She stared again at the piercing jewelled eyes on the Suci Kancil’s little golden head. Then, she looked back at me with a slightly puzzled expression.

Suddenly, she smiled... as if I had accidentally unlocked some secret... as if the solution had been miraculously revealed through her fog of confusion.

She squeezed my hand reassuringly, casting a glance over the mementos of our recent life for a moment longer.

‘I am thinking of Singapore, Alfredo, and the Raffles Hotel... back in March, when you first met Dr Johnston...’ She lifted her eyes to mine. ‘...and we became aware that there was so much more to this than we had realised... before it all went so dark.’