



CHAPTER 1

AN ORANGUTAN CALLED HARTA

My Sherlock senses were on red alert. Granny and Rex were loitering in front of the golden elephant statue, studying a map, debating which animal to see next. I stepped away. No need for people to know we were related. I pulled my little black book from my backpack, opening it.

On a fresh page, I wrote:

Melbourne Zoo, 4.16pm February 1.

*Present: Esther Powers, 11 , Rex Powers, 7
(8 in two days) and Dot (Granny) Powers,
ancient*

Potential crime: Wildlife smuggling?

Suspects:

*Frazzled mother, running, with twins in
stroller (always expect the unexpected)*

*Green uniformed zoo attendant directing
people into a cafe (strange! undercover crook?)
Teacher herding gang of children (hmm.)*

"Esther, dear!" Granny bumped my leg with her motor scooter. Her face matched her beloved *Red Baron*. "Rexie wants to see the orangutans."

"That's nice," I replied as I turned towards the seals. The underground viewing area, with its dark corners, was the perfect place for a criminal mastermind. Bonus: it would be a few degrees cooler. My '*Save the Bees*' t-shirt was already sticking to me.

"Essie!" Rex grabbed my elbow.

"Reichenbach, Rex!" I yanked my arm free. I was NOT going to start my new city life, caving into Rex's demands.

"Reichenbach?" Granny asked.

"It's Esther swearing, Gran," explained Rex. "Some weird Sherlock-thing." He made a face and then pulled on the handle of the *Red Baron* forcing Granny to change direction. "We're going THIS way!" They zoomed back the way we'd come, looking for where the path split away toward the orangutans.

Even though Granny was technically 'the adult in charge,' I couldn't help feeling responsible. Right now, for instance, she was letting Rex lead her through the exit-only path which was a short cut to the orangutans.

"That's not the right way!" I yelled, running to catch up. Inside the bamboo tunnel, an eerie silence struck me. Then, I almost collided with the *Red Baron*. Granny and Rex were frozen in place as if posing for a weird photo. "What are you guys – AAAGH!"

An orangutan was meandering along the path towards us.

"Hells bells!" shrieked Granny.

"Cool!" breathed Rex.

The orangutan stared at Rex. It bared its teeth in a sign of aggression. Would it rip us limb from limb?

A female zookeeper appeared at a bend in the path behind the ape. "Don't make any sudden movements," she called. Even though her voice was calm, the orangutan stole a peek at her over its shoulder. The keeper was a good fifty paces away. Now, THAT did not fill me with confidence. Orangutans are usually gentle, but still...

"Didn't you hear the announcement?" the keeper growled. She was close enough now that I could read her name tag: LIZ. "You're supposed to be sheltering indoors!" *Sorree. We must've missed the memo!*

Out the corner of my eye I saw other keepers, sneaking through the bamboo like stealthy soldiers. One perched opposite us. He raised what looked like a tranquiliser gun. I licked my dry lips and swallowed.

"He's not likely to hurt you," said Keeper Liz, moving slowly closer.

Was that supposed to be reassuring?

"Just step calmly away."

"Gran!" I tugged on her arm. "It's time to move!" Gran began reversing the Red Baron like a drunk dodgem car driver. I scurried alongside her.

When we re-entered the zoo forecourt, it was empty. Gran manoeuvred the Red Baron behind the trunk of a giant palm tree. I huddled alongside her, catching my breath, and peering out.

"Rex?" I turned to look at him; he *was* right behind me.

But now, he wasn't.

"Wait here, Gran." I slid out from behind the trunk.

"Esther?"

"I'm going to get Rex."

Back in the green corridor that led to the orangutans, I took a leaf out of the keeper's book. I left the path, weaving through the bamboo, creeping undercover. It didn't take long to find Rex. The orangutan had him spell-bound. He crouched, making himself small, as the ape moved towards him. It seemed magnetised by Rex's carrot-top, reaching out a leathery hand to stroke his hair.

Rex slowly lifted his bowed head, revealing an idiotic grin. He held out his hand, like you'd do for a strange dog to sniff. The orangutan bared its teeth again... and gave Rex a high-five! My brother's face lit up like a year's worth of pocket money had fallen into his hands.

Meanwhile, Keeper Liz, now in spitting distance, peeled a banana. The orangutan eyed her. You didn't need to be a genius to see what it was thinking – fruit or freedom?

"Harta," Keeper Liz called. "Harta, want a narney?"

Harta looked at Rex. Then, he looked at the banana.

"That's it, Harta." The keeper's voice was low and sing-songy like one of the meditation podcasts we endure at home. "There's a good boy."

Harta made his choice. He gave Rex a brief glance and then loped, on all fours, towards Keeper Liz. When he reached her, he grabbed the banana and stuffed it in his mouth. Keeper Liz held out a hand which the orangutan took. They wandered off towards the orangutan enclosure.

Rex sprung back to life. "Essie, did you see that?" he yelled. "That was the coolest thing, EVER!"

It was kind of cool, but I wasn't going to give him the

satisfaction of agreeing with him. "You see, but you do not observe." It was one of my top five Sherlock quotes.

"Huh?"

"Since when do animals at the zoo escape? It's a mystery!"

"Mystery?" croaked Gran.

I jumped. When had Granny arrived on the scene? "Yes," I told her. "The mystery is: *how did he get out?*"



THE SITUATION CALLED for urgent detecting. Rex ran ahead as I followed Granny towards the orangutan enclosure. The zoo visitors were trickling out of evacuation, and my heart started to gallop as we joined the sea of people hoping for a glimpse of the star ape. Crowds were definitely not my thing, but sometimes, detectives must put their own needs aside. This was one of those times.

We found Harta already back in his enclosure. He sat in a hay-filled tyre on a platform in front of the display glass. Picking his nose. Seriously, apart from the excess fur, he could have been Rex. Meanwhile, Rex had nabbed a prime seat at the window, directly in front of Harta. *He* started picking *his* nose. *Ugh.*

Then, the weirdest thing happened. Rex stopped picking his nose and put his hand down his pants and scratched his butt. The orangutan scratched his butt!

I scabbled again in my backpack for my little black book. On a fresh page, I wrote:

Melbourne Zoo, 4.45pm

Present: E.P., R.P., D.P. and Harta (suspicious ape).

Potential crime:

I chewed on my pen watching people bang on the glass trying to get Harta's attention. *What itty bitty brains!*

There wasn't *really* a potential crime, was there? Did someone help the orangutan escape? I scanned the enclosure. There were no obvious escape routes. No places where the wire gaped. I'd just written *wildlife smuggling?* when the smell hit me!

"Graaaaanny! Was that you?"

"Peter Pop-off," said Granny.

Did I mention she names her farts?

Granny put a wrinkled hand on Rex's arm. "Everything okay, Rexie?"

Rex ignored her. He was entranced. Harta's eyes moved rhythmically from side to side. Even *I* felt the power of those deep brown eyes — eyes that seemed disturbingly... human.