



CHAPTER SAMPLE  
PEARLY AND PIG  
AND THE  
LOST CITY OF  
MU SAVAN

# FOR PETER-

## my Mekong River travel buddy

First published in 2023  
by Walker Books Australia Pty Ltd  
Locked Bag 22, Newtown  
NSW 2042 Australia  
www.walkerbooks.com.au

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN: 978 1 760655 45 7

Typeset in Ovo  
Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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SUE WHITING

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# CHAPTER 1



It was the lush green jungle climbing dizzily from the river that made Pearly Woe's head swirl. She sat at the back of the longboat, gripping the edge of her seat, her shoulders tense, her teeth clenched.

Twisting vines and hungry jungle plants seemed to gobble the ragged hillsides in great leafy gulps. Pearly felt as though she had entered a land that time forgot – an ancient land filled with T-rexes and raptors and brontosauruses. In her mind's eye, she saw enormous pterodactyls circling above. A T-rex thrashing through the jungle tossing wild banana trees out of its way. She could almost hear its roar, feel its hot toothy breath.

Pearly chewed on her bottom lip and willed away the terrifying images. Italian phrases bubbled into her throat – Italian being her go-to language when she was stressed. And, boy, was she stressed.

*Mamma mia!* she told herself. *Ferma! Stop!*

Pearly couldn't - she wouldn't - let her wild imaginings get in the way. This was her chance to prove herself.

Her parents had called it a "family trip" - a holiday, but Pearly wasn't fooled. This was no family trip or holiday. They were on their way to the village of Ban Noa in the tiny kingdom of Anachak where they would start a long trek through dense jungle in search of the ancient lost city of Mu Savan. A journey through a kingdom with no electricity, no internet, no phone reception, no modern conveniences, to find the ruins of the fabled city her father had been researching for decades. That did not sound like a family "trip" to Pearly. That sounded in every possible way like an adventure. An adventure into the wilds that had already taken two chartered plane trips, one minibus, this longboat and five days to get this far.

And Pearly knew deep within that the only reason she was invited along was so her father could test her. Her father loved setting tests and this was so obviously a test - his way of seeing if her three years of training had paid off. If she had what it took to be an Adventurologist. Pearly clutched her head with both hands and gave it a swift shake. She simply had to stop filling her mind with roaring T-rexes and sharp-clawed raptors ...

Pig wasn't helping. He paced up and down the middle of the boat through the narrow passageway,

oinking under his breath, OINKY OINKY NO-NO! OINKY OINKY NO-NO! which was Pig for, *TROUBLE, I SMELL TROUBLE!*

Pearly did not need or want trouble.

She wanted smooth sailing.

She wanted a walk in the park.

She wanted the chance to shine.

Grandpa Woe and her dad, Ricky Woe, sat up the front of the boat beside Pearly's mother, Angel. Angel was perched on a stool behind the boat's wheel, and as usual was giving anyone who would listen a running commentary of the ins and outs of navigating a longboat through the treacherous currents of the Mekong River.

Pearly couldn't hear what her mum was saying above the thrum of the boat's engine, but she could tell by the sheer delight on the faces of her family and the way they were pointing at things and laughing that they were loving every minute of this trip.

Why couldn't she be like that? Why did every bump make her think they had hit a submerged boulder or a hungry crocodile? Why did that luscious jungle only make her wonder where the tigers and snakes and stampeding herds of wild elephants were hiding?

Pig trotted up beside her, his hairs bristling. OINKY OINKY NO-NO! he oinked again.

"What trouble?" Pearly whispered.

*I don't know, Pig oinked. But something isn't right.*

Pearly loved Pig and was proud of his supersonic sniffer and how useful it was, but right now she just wanted reassurance – some positive vibes. Please.

“Maybe you're just excited?” suggested Pearly desperately. “Maybe you're reacting to the fact that we're so close to the village where you were born. So close to seeing your ma.”

*You think I don't know the difference between excitement and trouble!* Pig snorted. *Of course, I'm excited. I can't wait to see Ma. But that's not it. SOMETHING IS WRONG.* Pig squealed that last bit, which only made Pearly's heart thud all the more painfully against her chest. Sometimes having a best friend who had a nose that knows things was tricky!

Just then, Angel cut the engine, and the boat began to drift.

Grandpa Woe stood hands on hips, gazing towards the shore. Her father was frowning. Something was wrong. Pig's snout was right again.

Pearly eased herself to her feet and lumbered down the aisle to join them. “What's up?” she asked, her mouth suddenly dry.

“Baffling,” said Grandpa Woe. He took off his floppy hat and mopped the sweat off his bald head with the palm of his hand.

“The jetty should be just over there,” explained Ricky.



“Near those basalt boulders. But there’s no sign of it.”

“Maybe it’s round the next bend,” suggested Angel, turning the wheel vigorously to avoid a sandbar. “The terrain is pretty similar round here. I remember when we visited that time before Pearly was born, there was an extravagant grove of palms along—”

“No,” Grandpa Woe cut her short. “I spent almost a year of my life here and I know this is the spot.”

“I agree,” said Pearly’s father. “This certainly feels like the right beach. That limestone peak behind is definitely Elephant Nose—”

OINKY OINKY NO-NO! OINKY OINKY NO-NO! Pig squealed. Pearly crouched beside him and held him close.

“What’s Pig saying?” Angel asked Pearly.

“Trouble,” said Pearly. “Pig can smell trouble.” Pearly was the only one in her family who understood Pig and she felt proud every time she was asked to translate.

“I can’t smell it,” said Grandpa Woe. “But I can *feel* it. Pig’s right. I think we need to investigate. Can you head to shore, Angel?”

Pearly’s mother restarted the engine, turned the wheel and edged the boat towards the sandy shoreline. Once in the shallows, Grandpa Woe and Ricky tugged off their boots and socks and launched themselves over the side, as agile as gymnasts. Angel leaned over the rail with a long bamboo pole, using it as a rudder to

turn the boat tightly as Ricky and Grandpa Woe guided it onto the shore.

Pearly pulled on her adventure pack. The last time she had pulled on her trusty adventure pack and stepped off a boat like this, she had stepped onto the rocky shores of Antarctica. That had certainly not been a walk in the park. But then she had not been prepared for that adventure – she hadn't trained for it and her adventure pack hadn't even been packed properly. She straightened her shoulders, tightened her straps and clipped on the belt. This time she *was* trained and prepared. This time would be different. She could do this. Couldn't she?

She passed her father and Grandpa Woe their packs, and followed Angel and Pig as they clambered onto dry land.

They all heaved the boat up onto the sand. Angel secured it to a stump poking out of the jungle edge. Ricky wiped his feet with his socks and put his boots back on.

Grandpa Woe didn't bother. He raced across the beach barefooted to the jungle edge, and stood staring at the wall of green, scratching his chin. "Curious," he said, then, "Perplexing."

Ricky joined him, his ageing map of the area in hand. "There should be a track somewhere here. I remember it distinctly. But there's no sign of it."

Pearly and Pig wandered along the beach, Pig with his snout to the sand, oinking, OINKY OINKY NO-NO! OINKY OINKY NO-NO! He sniffed and oinked and sniffed and oinked until he stopped suddenly beside a broken-down bamboo structure concealed beneath a clutch of ferns and vines.

Pearly and Pig's eyes zeroed in on the strange structure, then on each other.

"Grandpa Woe!" Pearly called urgently.

Grandpa Woe, Ricky and Angel jogged up the beach and peered at the strange structure. Grandpa's weather-beaten face was furrowed with worry. He rubbed again at his stubbly chin.

"Curiouser and curiouser," he said.

"The remains of the jetty," elaborated Ricky, checking between his crumpled map, his compass and the scene before him. "Which means the track to Ban Noa is directly in front of us."

They all turned to where Grandpa Woe was already pointing.

But there was no track. Just dense impenetrable jungle.

"*Mamma mia*," breathed Pearly.

OINKY OINKY NO-NO! oinked Pig.

He was darn right.