



Orchid Hunter

Book 4

S. E. Grosskopf

PREVIEW

Copyright © 2024, S. E. Grosskopf
segrosskopf.com
calicoquill.com

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

AI Disclaimer: Any images, including the cover image, may have been created with a combination of AI and manual image editing tools. The text of this book was written by a real human.

NO AI TRAINING: Without in any way limiting the author's [and publisher's] exclusive rights under copyright, any use of this publication to "train" generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies to generate text is expressly prohibited. The author reserves all rights to license uses of this work for generative AI training and development of machine learning language models.

ISBN: 978-1-965651-08-7

Author's Note:

Want a FREE prequel? Visit my

website:

segrosskopf.com



Chapter I

Kalimantan, Borneo
1896

Melvin Forster swung his machete. A strange jungle bird squawked overhead. Another obnoxious Rhinoceros Hornbill. He had difficulty keeping the hundreds of varieties of birds straight, but those were the easiest to remember. They looked the funniest and made the most noise. He chopped his way through the dense foliage between the massive dipterocarp trees.

A flock of Blue Naped Parrots flapped their wings and took off in a flutter of waving branches. He paused to wipe the sweat from his forehead and gulped water from his canteen. An orangutan dangled from a branch above him, watching.

This was Forster's second expedition. At five expeditions, Sinclair was pushing his luck. Most orchid hunters didn't live through that many. Forster had chosen to explore in the opposite direction from their camp, though he stayed within shouting distance of Sinclair.

Harsh conditions, disease, wild animals, unfriendly natives, armed robbers . . . all for a few delicate flowers, less than twenty percent of which survived the voyage back to the dealer in New York. Forster wiped his forehead again, then pressed on,

thwacking his way through tough vegetation while insects buzzed around his face.

The demand for orchids, which had gripped the civilized world in irrational delirium for decades, was waning. Better propagation methods meant an increase in supply and a drop in prices. No longer was it necessary to plunder the virgin jungle of every blossom to give the dealers new stock. Now, the only glory lay in discovering new species. The discoverer had naming rights. *Forsteria magnificia*. . . His name in botanical journals and encyclopedias for generations to come. Cornelius Thorne, the orchid dealer who commissioned the expedition, paid top dollar for new, spectacular varieties. Rose would be proud of him.

He stumbled and broke through a wall of plants into a hidden glade. Sunlight filtered through the ancient trees above. As he stepped farther into the natural clearing, he watched the ground for snakes. He glanced down at his tall, leather boots. They might not protect him from deadly, piercing fangs. At least twenty varieties in this area were venomous. Not something he wanted to step on accidentally. In unexplored regions, he could come across anything. Even Alfred Wallace hadn't travelled this far in his famed expedition years ago.

Smaller birds chirped and bounced around in the branches nearby. The humidity irritated his lungs. Sweat drenched the back of his shirt. Enthralled by the location, he paused to look around. The vegetation had thinned. At the base of one of the massive trees that ringed the open area, a splash of blue against the green caught his attention.

A large flower with iridescent silver-blue petals. He got down on his hands and knees to examine it, doubly surprised to find a terrestrial orchid when he'd been searching the tree trunks for epiphytes. It was monofloral, with one large flower per stalk. Three sepals, approximately equal in size, silvery blue with white flecks. Three petals arranged between the sepals. Two resembled the sepals. The third, larger and positioned on the bottom of the flower, was darker blue with an intricate silver pattern. The beauty of it took his breath away.

Something rustled in the underbrush. A furry head popped up. Black ears, a peculiar pattern of spots, wide brownish-yellow eyes. Face to face with a clouded leopard, Forster scurried backwards on his hands and knees. The cat sprang away, then turned to stare. Black spots around the eyes gave it the appearance of a startled masked robber. It blinked and shook its head, as if he had disturbed its afternoon nap. The shaking traveled from the head and down the spine to the end of its tail.

This was the first leopard he'd seen since the start of the expedition. They were usually far more elusive. *Lrikulaw*, the natives called it. It weighed less than fifty pounds, smaller than the average retriever. The tail still twitched. A moment later, timidity overcame feline curiosity. It bounded away without disturbing a single leaf.

Forster shook off the moment of fright and crawled back to the orchid. The silvery iridescence gave it a ghostly appearance. Though he only saw one, there had to be more like it nearby. The birds went silent. The entire jungle held its breath. He retrieved a trowel from his bag and began to dig around the base, extracting it carefully while keeping the moist soil packed around the roots.

Forsteria magnificia would be a fitting name. The specimen was magnificent. He wrapped the roots in a small burlap pouch and stood, finally noticing the silence of the birds. Footsteps padded through the foliage behind him. A twig snapped. He spun around.

A Malayan Tiger crouched low and flicked the end of its ringed tail back and forth. Unlike the leopard, it weighed over two hundred pounds and measured almost eight feet in length. One hideous amber eye locked onto his, the other had lost its reflective quality. A dark and shrunken socket oozed gunk down the left side of its face. Broken whiskers, mangy fur, protruding ribs. It was old. Too old and clumsy to catch deer or monkeys. Hunger had driven it mad.

“Sinclair! Help!”

The tiger flinched and hunched lower. A deep growl rumbled from somewhere inside of it. Forster's first instinct was to clutch

the orchid close. His second was to swing his equipment bag. It hit the beast squarely in the eye.

A roar exploded. The tiger sprang. The impact knocked him over backwards. The orchid flew out of his grip as teeth tore into his shoulder. The tiger's one good eye stared into his. It flexed its claws against his chest and made softer, hungry growling noises while it sank its teeth deeper.

A rifle shot rang. The tiger jerked and released him. It spun around. Forster propped himself up enough to watch. Sinclair frantically tried to clear a jam out of the rifle, reloaded it, and aimed. The cat snarled and charged. The gun spat lead again and the tiger rolled into a twitching ball at Sinclair's feet. Smoke curled from the barrel of the rifle. Sinclair nudged the cat with his shoe. It went limp.

"Sinclair . . ." Forster wheezed and laid back into the foliage, trembling from shock. Blood soaked through his shirt. "The orchid . . ." He tried to point, but couldn't use his arm. His vision flashed and warped. "*Forsteria magnificia.*"

Sinclair poked through the underbrush until he found it. The stalk miraculously wasn't broken. The petals were all intact. He checked it carefully, admiring the color and running his fingers across the silky texture. "*Sinclairia magnificia.*"

He picked up his gun and walked away.



Chapter II

Wednesday, April 1, 1931

Detective Sergeant O’Conner walked down the long sidewalk to the door of an aging Victorian-style home in the Patterson Heights subdivision of Milford Falls. The front yard had a vast garden area, but the growing season hadn’t yet begun. A complaint about stolen flowers—from a woman named Rose Thorne—had to be another April Fool’s joke. He’d already spent an hour earlier in the morning investigating several creatively rearranged road signs which had caused a traffic jam downtown. Some people’s kids . . .

He knocked. Footsteps approached. A woman answered. Maybe over fifty, though he didn’t like to comment on a woman’s age. She wore her hair short and accented an otherwise plain dress with a graceful string of pearls. “Mrs. Thorne? I’m Detective Sergeant O’Conner. You called to report a robbery?” He showed his badge.

“Miss Thorne.” She invited him inside and led him through the house. “My father, Cornelius Thorne, once owned one of the biggest greenhouses in New York. He sold it and retired to Milford Falls after the orchid craze ended. He left me the remainder of his private collection a few years ago.”

“What kind of flowers?” She brought him into a solarium, a greenhouse attached to the back of the house. It might as well have been a jungle. Pots of flowers fitting every description covered the tables and filled the air with sickly-sweet perfume. Squeaky little birds hopped around in a big wire cage. The heat and humidity made him thirsty for lemonade. With extra ice.

“Orchids. More specifically, three Bornean Moonglow Orchids. The Latin name is *sinclairia magnificia*. Nothing else was touched, even though I have several others comparable in value.”

“How much is one of these worth?”

“The largest one, the original, is insured for five hundred dollars. The two smaller ones, two-fifty each.”

“Two-hundred-and-fifty?” That was more than he made in . . . he didn’t want to calculate how long. It would be too depressing.

“Yes.” She turned to face him. “This was not exactly petty theft. Rare varieties of orchids can be extremely valuable, and the exact price is difficult to calculate. At an auction with the right collectors present, the bidding for a rare plant can go over a thousand dollars easily. These have been difficult to propagate. I only know of five in existence. My three, and two owned by another local collector named Wallace Forster, which he bought from my father years ago. These orchids are extremely finicky. If they are not properly cared for, they will die within a week.”

“Where did you keep them? When did you notice they were missing?”

“They were in the Wardian case. I noticed the first thing this morning, so it must have happened overnight.”

“In the what?”

“The Wardian case.” Rose motioned for him to follow, then directed him to a large glass case. It looked like a tabletop-sized greenhouse. “It helps to recreate the tropical climate. These types of orchids prefer bright, but indirect sunlight. They need high humidity, but don’t like soggy roots, so overwatering will also kill them. They need to be fertilized once a week. I have a special preparation for them . . .” She sounded like she was giving care

instructions for a baby. There were several other orchids in the case, each spectacular in their own right. She lifted the lid, reached inside, and pulled one out. No roots.

O’Conner took it for a closer look. It was cleverly constructed of painted silk and wire. “Fake?”

“Somebody replaced all three of my Moonglows with those. It does look remarkably like the real thing.”



The phone rang. The sound broke Lowan’s concentration as he pieced together a new prototype. He waited for Rita, his secretary, to answer. She didn’t because he’d just sent her to the post office. After several more rings, he finally came to that realization and rushed into the main office to answer it himself.

Still flustered and out of breath, he grabbed the receiver and stepped around the desk to his chair. “Hello?”

“I’m looking for a detective. The ad said Lowan and Sen?” The woman on the other end of the line sounded bold and decisive. “I need to recover some stolen property by Sunday and I’m not sure how much the police are going to do about it.”

“Yes, I am Lowan. I can help with that. What is your name and what was stolen?”

“I’m Rose Thorne. A thief broke into my solarium last night and stole three rare orchids. This might be easier to discuss in person.”

“Of course.”

He took her information, left a note on Rita’s desk, and went out to locate a taxi. Twenty minutes later, he strode down a sidewalk bordered by mostly dormant flowerbeds. A few lilies and tulips were starting to come up, but nothing was in bloom this early.

Rose opened the door before he reached it. She offered to shake hands and invited him inside. “I already explained everything to the police, but I’m not sure how much they’re going to do.”

“Which officer did you speak with?”

“Sergeant O’Conner.” She led him through the house to a glass-walled jungle room. Light filtered through the leaves of plants taller than them. Birds chirped shrilly enough to become annoying.

“I have not worked closely with him, but I believe he will do his best.” Lowan preferred to work with Detective Lieutenant Marx. O’Conner was also experienced and competent, but followed the regulations more thoroughly and objected to interference from a private detective.

“The Bornean Moonglow Orchids were here.” She brought him to a large glass case on one of the tables. “The thief replaced them with nearly identical replicas. Sergeant O’Conner took them for evidence, so I don’t have one to show you.”

“In that case, these orchids were specifically targeted. Who else is familiar with this species and knew you had it?”

“Any member of the Milford Falls Botanical Society would know I have them. They were to be the main attraction for the upcoming flower show on Sunday, as they have been for several previous years. As rare as these are, not many people could have copied them. The photographs are only in black-and-white, so someone must have seen them in person or else they wouldn’t have been able to get the colors right.”

“Does anyone else have flowers like these?”

“There are only five known examples of this species. I had three. Another local collector, Wallace Forster, has two, which he bought from my father several years ago for eight hundred dollars each. It is hard to calculate the value of something so unique, especially in a market that fluctuates rapidly.”

“That is quite a lot of money for a flower.”

“Yes, it is.” She sighed and reached into the case to test the dampness of the soil around several of the other orchids and examine the leaves for insects. “That might be slightly above the current fair market value, but they are worth more than that to me. They were part of the last of my father’s collection after he sold his business. Not only that, but the expedition to Borneo in which the original flower was discovered . . . my fiancé was killed in a

tiger attack. They hold a great deal of sentimental value. I would like them back before the flower show on Sunday, but also keep in mind that they need special care and will die within a week. I'll pay to get them back."

"Where do you recommend I start?"

"Wallace Forster is the only person who knows as much about them as I do, including what they look like. He tried to buy mine several times, but I wouldn't sell. He also had a key to my house at one time and could have copied it then. After my father passed away, I needed someone to watch my flowers while I was gone. I didn't have the Moonglows here then, but for many of the rare species I had at the time, he was the only person qualified. He came with the recommendation of the Botanical Society, and not only that, but . . . he was my fiancé's father. I've known him for years and I never would have suspected him of something like this . . ."

"There was no evidence of a forced entry?"

"No. He must have had a key."



Chapter III

Detective Lieutenant Marx parked his car in the lot and went to the back door of the police station. He hadn't even been to his office yet this morning, since Acting Captain Kramer sent him out immediately on a homicide. Just a dummy doused in red paint on the floor of a shop, but looking through the front window, the view had alarmed several passersby. Another stupid April Fool's prank.

He reached the back door and stopped. A sign was taped on it: *Door is broken. Go around to the front.* Grumbling, he walked around the building and up the steps.

He paused near the front desk to speak with Sergeant O'Leary. "What's wrong with the back door?"

"Nothing." O'Leary snickered. "April Fool's." The phone rang and he reached for it, immediately snapping into a serious manner. "Milford Falls Police Department."

Marx grumbled and walked past the desk, then down the hall to the offices. He went all the way through the building to the back door, ripped the sign off, and crumpled it, then circled back to his office. And stopped.

His door was ajar. He left it locked overnight, but that didn't matter much around here. Getting pranked twice already this

morning amplified his suspicious nature. Rather than push the door open, he reached up through the crack and ran his fingers along the top edge. He encountered an obstruction. Probably a full bucket of cold water poised to dump on whoever opened the door. Detective Sergeant Sanducci had done that to him for the last three years. The first year, he'd fallen for it.

Since he wasn't tall, the easiest way to take it down without causing a disaster was to stand on a chair. He went down the hallway, looking through the other office windows to find someone who might let him borrow one. Chief Benson wasn't in. He wasn't about to ask Kramer for anything. In the next office, Sergeant O'Conner brooded over his desk. He shared the room with Sanducci, but the other desk was empty at the moment.

He tapped on the door. O'Conner looked up, then waved for him to come in. "Lieutenant, how did that homicide go this morning?"

"Nothing but a dummy and a can of red paint. I warned the trickster that a prank like that could get him arrested, and he promised to clean it up right away. Hopefully, that's the end of it." He stepped farther into the office, tossed the crumpled paper in the wastebasket, and pointed. "Can I borrow a chair for a minute?"

"Sure, lieutenant. But first, do you know anything about flowers?"

"Uh, no." He grabbed the back of one of the non-swivel chairs beside O'Conner's desk. "Something to do with another prank?"

"I'm not sure. A woman named Rose Thorne complained that someone stole her prized orchids and replaced them with fakes." He held up a silk flower on a wire. "Now I get to wonder if it was a prank, if she exaggerated the value or is trying to scam the insurance company, or if they even existed. If they're as rare as she said, I don't know how anyone could sell them. It would be like trying to pawn a hot Rembrandt. On the other hand, there was no evidence of a forced entry. If she did try to stage the robbery herself for the insurance money, she did a bad job of it. Did you ever work on a case involving stolen flowers?"

“No.” He grabbed the chair and slid it back, wanting nothing more than to get into his own office without recreating the Great Flood. “If I hear anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks. I guess I’ll start with the insurance company. Just how I wanted to spend the afternoon. . . . *Flowers*, ugh.”

“I’ll bring this right back.” Hoping to avoid any further conversation, Marx pulled the chair into the hallway in time to see Acting Captain Kramer knock on his door.

“No, don’t!” Marx’s own shout surprised him. He didn’t usually raise his voice, especially to a superior.

Kramer turned to glare. Contrary by nature, he shoved the door open. Marx saw it happen in slow motion. The bucket tipped and fell. Water poured out over Kramer. Metal clanged against his head. He ducked and swung while bellowing like an enraged bull moose.

Marx froze, unable to think of anything to say, but with the deep and sinking assurance that he was in serious trouble. The bucket rolled down the hall and stopped at Marx’s feet. Kramer stared, still sputtering, his white-blond hair plastered down to his forehead and his clothes dripping. A puddle surrounded him and spread across the floor. His face turned dark red. Veins bulged on his forehead. Everyone else in the hallway stopped. Men leaned quietly out of offices.

“You . . .” Kramer sputtered through his teeth. His mustache twitched. Even his eyes looked red. He huffed and stomped closer, leaving a trail of wet footprints.

“I didn’t.” Marx ducked and stepped back, putting the chair between them. His voice went hoarse. “It was meant for me. I was just getting a chair to take it down.”

“Pick up the bucket. Give it to me.” He stepped closer, moving stiffly, his hands wrapped into fists the size of bricks. His shoes squeaked.

Marx bent down and grabbed it by the handle, acutely aware that the motion was the same as bowing to Kramer. He didn’t want to step any closer. Not within striking range.

“Give it to me.” Kramer had never hit him before, but he looked mad enough to do it now. He held out his hand.

“I didn’t do it.” Marx edged just close enough to pass it to him. As soon as the transfer was complete, he leapt away and moved back behind the chair.

“Who did?”

If he ratted on Sanducci, he could expect far worse retribution. “I don’t know.”

Kramer hissed out a few German phrases which sounded extremely impolite. He pulled a sopping handkerchief out of his pocket and tried to wipe his face with it. “We just got another call about a homicide. Go get the details from O’Leary and get out of my sight.”

Behind Kramer, Marx’s office door was still open. He wasn’t about to try to pass Kramer to close it. He shoved the chair to O’Conner, who had been watching from his office doorway, then retreated to the front lobby.

Want to keep reading?

For purchase options, visit my website:
segrosskopf.com

On my website, you'll also find the full list of available books and news about upcoming releases.

One more quick request. Do you know anyone else who likes to read? If you think they'd like this book, would you tell them about it? Building an audience isn't easy, and every recommendation helps me to reach new readers. Thank you!

Other Books by S. E. Grosskopf

Book 1: Lowan's Checkmate

Lowan, a private detective and telepathic alien, teams up with Detective Lieutenant Marx, an introverted underdog, to catch a clever jewel thief terrorizing Milford Falls.

Book 2: Shamrock Hunt

When a famous Celtic medallion—the prize for a charity raffle—is stolen, Lowan competes with a rival private detective to find it in time for the St. Patrick's Day parade. Meanwhile, Marx investigates the murder of a history professor and faces off with a lifelong enemy.

Book 3: Murder on Harrisonville Road

After writing a newspaper story about the crimeless village of Harrisonville, Tom Nanning is ambushed and left for dead. When Lowan investigates, he finds himself trapped in a small town with a murderer hidden among its quirky residents.

Book 4: Orchid Hunter

While Marx investigates a murder committed via April Fool's prank, which renders alibis useless, Lowan dives into the black market orchid trade to recover the main attraction stolen before the Easter flower show. Both investigations lead to a thirty-five-year-old tiger attack in the jungles of Borneo.

Book 5: The Great Flamingo Robbery

When the mangiest flamingo is stolen from the zoo, Lowan is called in to investigate. He never expected to get mixed up with a beautiful ruby thief or a South American dictator.

Book 6: The Unicorn Staff

The murder of an archeologist and the theft of a staff made from a unicorn's horn lead Lowan and Marx on a wild quest for answers.

Book 7: Lowan's Circus Tricks

Lowan's search for Eloise Meer leads him to a travelling circus in dusty Dry Creek, Kansas. But the only Eloise at the circus is a ring-tailed monkey. Hunting for clues, he joins the circus and promptly finds himself framed for murder.

Book 8: The Starmaster

The Starmaster is hunting for aliens—and he's after Lowan.

**I add new books quickly! For a complete, up-to-date list, visit my website:
segrosskopf.com**

