

# **Easter Island Club**



**JOY DALY**

## CHAPTER ONE

Eve, sitting alone at the front of the classroom, bit her lip as she read the whiteboard.

### *SAVING THE ANIMALS*

#### *Group project*

Her stomach rolled.

‘Lame,’ whispered Maddie to Becka, sitting next to her, as she read the title.

‘How long does it have to be Mrs Garson?’ called Dylan from the back row.

‘As long as it needs to be, Dylan.’

‘I reckon mine needs to be seven lines then.’ He swung on his seat as the boys sniggered.

‘Then I *reckon* you’ll be failing this subject Dylan, and you know the policy – you fail, you repeat, no exceptions. And sit on your chair properly.’

Maddie skimmed the text. ‘But we’ve done about a billion projects on endangered species, where they live, what they eat, what they wear.’

Louise Garson glared at her over the top of her wire-rimmed bifocals as the muttering around the class grew. ‘If you read it properly, Madison, you would realize that this isn’t an assignment on endangered species characteristics or habitats. This is about *saving* them. Were you asleep during the documentary you just watched?’

‘I was,’ said Dylan.

‘Enough,’ she snapped ‘The seventy per cent of animals and plants that will be extinct before the end of the century isn’t sometime in the distant future. This will be in your lifetime.’

Jack shook his head. 'She should have gone years ago, when she was only a hundred,' he whispered to Dylan. 'She can't get off that soap-box.'

'We might be top of the food-chain, but what happens when a link breaks?' The silence in the class stretched before Louise answered her own question. 'The whole chain breaks, *your* food-chain. If you feel no motivation to save their future, what about your own?'

'The future you guys stuffed,' shot Maddie.

Louise shrugged. 'Mea Culpa. But you lot aren't so innocent. Hands up if you've upgraded your mobile in the last twelve months.'

Almost everyone put up their hands.

Keep your hands up if you upgraded because you *wanted* to.'

Only one hand dropped.

She gave a grim smile. 'Case closed. Right then. You have the remainder of the lesson to organize who you will be working with and begin planning what you are going to be doing. I'll be next door marking papers, but if I hear any of you mucking up, I'll be back quick-smart.'

As Mrs Garson marched past, her floral china teacup and saucer, steady her hand, Eve said quietly, 'Can I please do it on my own?'

'No, Eve. You'll need to work in a group.'

Eve looked around the room before her gaze rested on Maddie.

## CHAPTER TWO

The boys immediately claimed the back of the classroom, milling at Dylan's desk, while the girls clustered around Maddie. She smiled at them all, then her eyes rested on Chimp. 'The group's full.'

Eve swallowed hard, wanting to slink away. She took a wavering breath. 'Please can...'

'We're F.U.L.L.' spelt Maddie, her Cleopatra hair scarcely moving as she turned to wink at the others.

'Yeah, full,' echoed Becka; Maddie's best friend, with a metal mouth of braces and a school skirt, three inches too short. She gave Eve a shove.

Eve stumbled backwards and knocked over a desk, tumbling onto the dirty-blue carpet squares amongst the pile of books. Laughter erupted and she could feel her face burning. She hated them; she hated them so much.

Jack, at the rear of the boys' group saw Chimp fall and moved to help. 'Here,' he said, holding out his hands. She glanced up; her dark blue eyes desolate.

'Thanks,' she mumbled and let him haul her to her feet. She stood beside him, arms limply at her sides as he righted the desk and gathered up the books.

'Eve's got a boyfriend,' said Maddie, and the girls laughed.

'Don't cry,' whispered Jack as Eve's shoulders started to shake. 'That's what they want.'

Eve nodded and made her way to her desk.

Jack followed, pulled up a chair opposite and sat down, long legs splayed on either side. 'What are you going to do?'

She shrugged, still not looking at him. Why was he talking to her? A tear leaked out and plopped on the desk. She smudged it with her hand, hoping he hadn't seen.

'Do you want to do the project with me?' he said as he caught the furtive swipe.

She looked at him and he flinched. 'Why are you saying this? What do you want?'

'Nothing, I just ah...'

He waited, but she kept staring. 'Okay then,' and he stood.

'Don't go,' she whispered.

He gave the guys a look as they milled around at the back of the classroom, then dropped into the seat.

'I've got it,' Matt played air guitar, his white-blond hair flying in all directions as he head-banged through a riff.

'What?' said Dylan, rocking on his chair and flexing his biceps that strained the sleeves of his white school shirt. With carrot-colored tufts of hair which poked out in all directions and a face which looked like he'd run into the back of a bus, he should have been a target for every bully in the school. But thanks to his giant dad's genes, Dylan was in the Queensland Rugby team for the fourth straight year and had made nationals in the past two.

'A brilliant idea,' said Matt.

'Go,' ordered Dylan as he let the legs of his chair thud to the floor.

'We should have a battle of the bands, or like a really cool concert and have all the proceeds go to some wildlife fund?'

'Nah,' said Luke. 'Some guy already did it for starving kids.'

Smitty drummed the table with pencils clasped between fingers almost the thickness of sausages. 'Bob someone, Bob Dylan I think?'

'No.' Peter shook his head and fiddled with the top button of his perfectly pressed school shirt. 'His name was Bob Geldhof.'

'We can do it again, but better,' said Matt.

'You won't do it better.' Peter gave an economical shake of his head. 'That concert was international. They were watching it on TV's all over the world.'

'Did they have YouTube?' shot Matt.

'Of course not. It was back in the dark ages.'

'I'll bet we could get U2. They're always banging on about stuff like this,' said Smitty.

Domingo rolled his eyes. He had only migrated to Australia two years ago and his Spanish accent was still strong as he said, 'Are you an idiot? We'd be lucky to get the local pub band.'

'That'd be okay. We could raise some money, hang out with the dudes and pass this stupid assignment while we're having fun.' Smitty clapped Dom on the shoulder with his meaty hand.

Dom shook it off.

'Does anyone else have an idea?' said Dylan.

There was silence.

'Okay, let's do it then. It'll be cool,' said Dylan.

Smitty punched the air as he whooped. Matt fell to his knees and did a rendition of *Smoke On The Water* while Luke strummed along.

'Boys, boys, I will not tell you again,' yelled Mrs Garson through the door.

'Do you have any ideas?' said Jack as the guys quieted.

Eve had an idea alright – a real left fielder, but she knew she'd be mad to say anything. It was obvious Jack wanted to bail. One miserable thought ran into the next. 'No. What about you?' She crossed her fingers in her lap.

‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘The guys sound like they’ve come up with a plan. We can join them.’ He pushed back in his chair.

She took a deep breath. She was going to have to say it. ‘I do have something.’

‘What?’ Jack sounded impatient and she could feel her face heating up. ‘It’s not actually an idea; it’s more like an experiment that I’ve been conducting for the past couple of years with my... ah, Marco.’

‘Who’s Marco?’ said Jack.

‘Um, he’s a bonobo.’

Jack covered his face with his hands. ‘So, they’re not rumors. Your best friend is a monkey.’

‘No,’ she said, ashamed of her lie. ‘But I’ve been learning to speak his language.’

Jack turned his laugh into a cough., ‘Uh hah. That’s interesting, but I think we should go with the guys.’ He stood up and began backing away.

Eve was furious with herself; she’d known this would happen. ‘Listen.’ She began a soft guttural grunting in her throat before switching to a high pitched eee. ‘That’s bonobo for sit down.’

Jack stared at her for a second before glancing around the room.

The whole class had stopped to gawk at Chimp, and they burst into laughter as Smitty began an imitation of a monkey in a cage.

Eve’s eyes flitted from one sneering face to the next, then finally rested on Jack as he hid a grin behind his hand. ‘Got to go,’ she mumbled as she sprang out of her chair and grabbed her backpack.

‘Chi... Eve,’ called Jack as she fled the room. He looked at the boys, howling with laughter as Becka peeled Smitty a pretend banana. ‘Jerks,’ he said and ran past Mrs Garson, after Eve.

He found her on the other side of the oval, hunched against the trunk of a massive eucalypt tree, her face blotchy and her eyes red.

'Hey,' he said.

She ignored him.

He tried again. 'Sorry about, um, you know. Sometimes they're jerks.'

'Sometimes?'

'Most of the time they're pretty good.'

'To you, maybe.'

Jack sank down beside her and settled against the trunk. 'Garson will be furious.'

'I don't care,' said Eve. The anger sharpened her voice as she shifted away from him.

'Look, I'm sorry I laughed. It's just, you know, weird. Even you have to admit that?'

Eve dropped her head to her chest and closed her eyes.

'When you made that noise. Well... It was a, it was ...' Jack's voice trailed away. 'It was like, um, weird. You really sounded like a monkey.'

'That's because I learned it from a bonobo,' said Eve and swung to face him. 'Cut the crap, Jack. Why are you really here?'

He looked at her for long seconds, and as she read his face her anger got colder. He was sorry for her.

'I don't know,' he said as rubbed his chin. 'Why don't you tell me about the monkey.'

Eve watched some leaves drifting off the tree as she made up her mind. If he laughed again, she was gone and she was not coming back to this school ever. She didn't care what mum or dad said. 'Marco's not a monkey, he's a bonobo.'

'Sorry, bonobo,' said Jack.

Eve shrugged. 'I know this is going to sound impossible, but it's true. I swear.' Already she hated the way she was sounding. 'When we adopted Marco, he was really young. About the equivalent to a toddler, and he amazed me because he could understand most of the things I said, even things I hadn't taught him.'



Anyway,' she hurried on as she watched skepticism settle across Jack's face, 'I decided I should try and speak bonobo. If Marco was clever enough to understand my language, maybe he was clever enough to teach me his.'

'You're telling me a monkey is teaching you to talk?'

'Yes,' she said. 'You heard it in the classroom when I said sit down.'

'I heard you make noises that sounded like a monkey, but I've only got your word that it meant sit down.'

Eve's sigh came from deep inside. 'If you come over to my place after school I'll prove I can talk to Marco.'

Jack shook his head. 'Let's go with the guys. They'll be okay, I promise.'

'No,' she turned away. 'You saw what they did.'

'It was just Smitty,' said Jack.

'They were all laughing.'

Jack was quiet for a minute, then he said 'I can't believe I'm saying this. Okay. I'll come over. But if this talking thing doesn't happen, we're with the guys. Deal?'

'Deal,' said Eve.

### CHAPTER THREE

When Jack reached the end of the driveway he whistled. Eve's backyard was huge, and it was completely covered with a wire enclosure at least six meters high. Inside, it looked like a rainforest. 'You're kidding me? Is this its home?'

'Yeah, we tried to make it like his natural habitat in the Congo.'

'Sweet', said Jack. 'Hey, there it is.' He pressed himself against the cyclone fence and laughed as Eve's monkey swung upside down from a drooping palm frond.

'Come in and meet Marco.' Eve fumbled in the pocket of her school shorts and pulled out a key ring.

Jack's laughter dried up as he considered the offer. It looked cute enough, but... It let go of the frond to scamper halfway up a tall Moreton Bay Fig with its trunk poking through the hole in the wire roof. Claspings the tree between long, powerful arms and legs, it looked at him with soft-brown eyes. Then it slapped the trunk and let out a high-pitched shriek.

Jack jumped and turned to Eve. 'Why's it doing that?'

'He's not an *it*, Jack, and he's doing it establish his territory. Come on.'

The padlock opened with a snick, and Eve gave the steel framed gate a push. She stepped inside, waiting for Jack.

'Does he bite?' said Jack still hanging back.

‘Bite? Of course he doesn’t bite. He’s a bonobo, one of the most social, sensitive species on this planet. Actually, they’re nicer than us. A lot nicer.’

Jack wasn’t convinced. He’d read a story where a chimp had chewed off a woman’s face – and they’d been friends. What would one do if it didn’t like you? He stepped inside and Eve locked the gate. ‘He’s a sneaky little guy; we don’t want him to escape,’ she said.

‘Escape,’ repeated Jack, trying not to sound nervous. Now she’d locked the gate there was no escape for him either. If the monkey turned into a homicidal maniac, he’d have to wrestle it to the ground. It was less than a meter high and probably no more than forty kilos he guessed, thirty kilos lighter than him, but... He swiped at his forehead with his shirt sleeve. This was crazy.

Eve was staring into his face. ‘Are you okay? You’re really pale. Let’s go sit on the bench. ‘Once Marco gets used to you, he’ll sit beside us.’

The bench was on the far side of the enclosure, at least thirty meters from the gate, and Jack pressed himself against the fence. What had he got himself into? Just because he’d felt sorry for her. ‘Why don’t we stay here?’

‘Come on Jack.’

He crunched through the leaf litter following her, looking up at the branch where the monkey had perched. Would it drop on him? He took his eyes off it to dodge the ropes, bars and rings spaced along a steel girder running the length of the cage. ‘Does he use all this stuff?’

‘Sometimes, and sometimes he’s just as happy to swing off a frond. We try and change things every now and again, bring in new equipment for him to play with. Here,’ and she patted the weathered hardwood slats.

Slinging off his pack, Jack perched on the bench beside her, his legs tensioned to spring at the first sign of danger, but Marco continued to sit in the branch, quiet and immobile.

The sun was dropping, but still had a good bit of heat, and as it sunk into his skin and the minutes ticked by, Jack began to relax. 'So how did you get him?' He stretched out his legs and crossed his sneakered feet, as he leaned against the bench's backrest. He was keeping a watchful eye on Marco, but Marco wasn't doing anything more threatening than scratching his belly.

'Remember Croucher's Circus? It came to the Coast two years ago and they pitched their tent at Salk Oval.'

'I didn't go,' said Jack as he watched the monkey swing effortlessly down the tree to land on the ground.

'Neither did I. But five days after they left, we found Marco, huddled in a bush in our front garden.'

'Uh ha,' said Jack, trying not to press into Eve, as the monkey moved closer to him.

I didn't want him to go back to the circus, so Mum and Dad said they'd take him to Australia Zoo, but they only had Cotton Top Tamarins.'

'What did you say Marco was? A bonobo? He looks like a chimp.'

'No, bonobos have thinner, longer legs, slimmer bodies and smaller, narrower faces. They're a rare species and super clever. Their DNA is more than ninety-eight per cent identical to ours.'

Jack didn't doubt that they were clever. As he'd been looking at Eve, the monkey had sidled closer, taking advantage of his distraction. Now as he swung back to face him, Marco turned slightly sideways and scooped up a twig, waving it in the air like he was conducting a band, an innocent expression on his face. 'So, how did you end up with him?'

'I talked mum and dad into it.'

'What! And despite his resolution to keep his eyes on Marco, Jack spun around to stare at Eve. 'How did you manage that? My Dad would never let me have a monkey.'

'It wasn't so hard,' muttered Eve, turning her face away.

And Jack understood. He caught movement out of the corner of his eye. Marco had dropped the stick and moved closer. As soon as he saw Jack looking, he picked up another stick, spun sideways and did the conducting thing again. He gave a small, tight smile. This was one sneaky dude. 'How do you look after a bonobo? I suppose it's the same as looking after a kid.'

'Huh,' said Eve. 'If only kids were looked after as good as this. You have to get a heap of licenses and approvals, and there's a ton of regulations from Quarantine. They have vaccinations and check-ups like kids. Then there's visits from the department every six months, and daily logbook entries. You need to be really careful with them. The right diet, the right behavior training, the right environment, the right...'

'Yeah, yeah, I get it.' Jack jumped as Marco made a sound, dropped the stick, and leapt onto Eve's lap.

'See, I told you he'd come.' Eve clicked in her throat and Marco wrapped long arms around her neck as he stared into her eyes.

Sitting Marco on her knee, Eve pointed to Jack. 'Friend,' she said.

Marco grunted.

'Friend,' repeated Eve.

Marco grunted again, fixing Jack with chocolate eyes.

'Now, wait a few minutes.'

'For what?' Jack couldn't help it. *What* came out squeaky.

'If you're lucky, he'll come to you.'

'I, I'm, let's, I...' Jack grabbed his pack and held it like a shield against his chest.

Marco made a small, warm sound and leapt from Eve's arms to land on Jack's pack.

'Ah,' yelled Jack springing from the bench, his pack flying into the ferns.

Marco locked his arms around Jack's neck and legs around his body, sticking like a leech. Oh my God, he's going for the jugular, thought Jack.

Eve began to giggle 'Honestly, it's alright. Marco is the gentlest boy in the world. Do you really think I would bring you in here if there was *any* danger at all?'

Jack considered her words as he stood frozen. 'Okay, probably not. But I've never worn a monkey before.'

Eve laughed. 'Worn a monkey? Just sit down and relax.'

That's easy for you to say, thought Jack. 'What about Marco?'

'He'll be right, he'll hold on.'

'That's what I was afraid of,' muttered Jack, as he lowered himself gingerly onto the bench.

The dappled sun pasted spots of yellow on their bodies as Jack introduced himself to Marco, and Marco introduced himself to Jack.

Jack ran tentative fingers through the warm black fur on Marco's back. It was a lot coarser than he'd guessed and not as thick as it had looked in the tree. He could clearly feel the papery skin underneath.

Marco wriggled and nestled closer as Jack's stroking hand found his neck and then his head. 'His hair looks like a bad toupee,' he said as he ran a finger down the center part, breathing in Marco's scent, a combination of fruit salad and fur.

'Don't say that. You'll give him a complex.'

'He can't understand me,' said Jack.

'You'd be surprised what he understands. Oh look, he's grooming you, that means he likes you.'

Jack pulled a face as Marco began digging through his scalp with long, sensitive fingers.

'He's found something,' Eve laughed as Jack blushed and reached up to cover his head with his outstretched hands.

'Come on Marco, back to me.' Eve stretched out her arms and as Marco returned, she nudged Jack in the side. 'So, are you ready for me to prove that Marco and I can talk to each other?'

‘Huh?’ For a moment Jack had forgotten why he was here. ‘Yeah, sure,’ he said, reaching over to give Marco a tickle. ‘Although it doesn’t matter if you can’t... you know, really talk. We can still do something together.’

She gave him a level stare. ‘You still don’t think I can do it, do you Jack?’ There was no joking in her eyes, and no doubt either. She was either delusional, or ... He shook his head. ‘I don’t know.’

Smiling, Eve dropped Marco to the ground and held his paw. ‘Follow me,’ she said. ‘We need the study for this.’

‘The study for what?’ Jack picked up his pack.

‘You’ll see,’ said Eve. She unlocked the gate and led Jack along the yellow brick pavers to the back door of her house.