Nyoman Rai is the main character in “The Monkey Forest Murders,” and other books in my mystery series, “The Balinese Investigator.” The books are set in Ubud, Bali, where Nyoman and his business partner Alice uncover murder and misdemeanor in every corner of the humid, equatorial island.

This short story will introduce you to Nyoman as he goes about his business on a normal day in Ubud.

THE INVISIBLE THIEF by Julia Ensley

“How long’s it going to take to fix my car?” Nyoman tried to keep his patience from evaporating completely. He’d had to enlist the help of his brother and nephew to get his silver Suzuki Karimun SUV going this morning.

Sukadi wiped the black grease from his hands onto a pink towel he’d pulled from the pocket of his overalls. “I don’t know if I can get to it today. I’m all alone in the workshop. Pretty busy.”

“I see. How about I give you a down payment?” Nyoman handed a red hundred-thousand-rupiah bill to the mechanic, who managed to smear it with grease as he folded it and put it away.

“That helps. I should be able to at least look at it this morning. You take your time strolling home and enjoy the fresh air, *Pak* Nyoman,” Sukadi said.

Fresh air, indeed. It was close to midday, the temperature and humidity were climbing and the day smelled of motorcycle exhaust and diesel fumes. Ubud’s main road was clogged, as usual, with cars, motorbikes, bicycles and pedestrians weaving a complicated dance around each other. A crowd had gathered outside an antiques store. People stared through the window, murmuring to each other, generating an air of excitement like spectators at a sporting event.

“Excuse me, can I please get through?” Nyoman said, first in English and then in Indonesian. Neither language persuaded anyone in the crowd to move. “What’s going on?” he asked the foreign tourist next to him.

“The store owner caught a shoplifter red-handed,” the burly man said. He had a strong Australian accent.

Elbowing his way to the front door, Nyoman heard indistinct shouting from inside the shop. The interior was steeped in gloom. Stone statues of menacing *dvarapala,* Balinese temple gate guardians, lined the walls. Carved wooden angels and flying frogs hung from the high ceiling, which was all but invisible in the low light. Cobwebs festooned the wares.

In the middle of the shop, a short Balinese man in a threadbare sarong and grubby white t-shirt held a blonde woman by the wrist.

She thrashed around, trying to free herself. “Let go of me, you ignorant brute. I haven’t stolen anything.” The blonde was also Australian. She wore shorts and a skimpy tank top that slid up and down her torso as she kicked and twisted.

The crowd of onlookers stared through the window at the free show. Some filmed the performance and narrated the action for a future audience, while others turned around and took selfies with the shoplifter as background.

“*Apa yang terjadi?* What’s going on here?” Nyoman entered the store and showed the proprietor and the blonde woman his private investigator’s license, for which he’d paid $19.95 online. “Let’s try to sort this out.”

“The lights went out and then this slut attempted to walk out the door with an antique silver necklace.” The proprietor spoke in Indonesian. He showed Nyoman the item, which he held in his other hand. “I managed to get it away from her.”

“Whatever he’s saying, it’s a lie,” the woman said. She lunged forward and tried to bite the proprietor’s arm.

He jerked her wrist and she screamed. Several onlookers crowding the doorway made noises of dismay. “The police will sort it out, love,” one of them said.

“You’d better let go of her, mate.” The tourist Nyoman had spoken to pushed his way into the shop. He took several steps towards the proprietor, who puffed out his chest and stood his ground.

Nyoman stepped between the tourist and the store owner. “You can help me, Sir, by making sure no one comes in or goes out of that door.”

All the while the woman squirmed and clawed at the proprietor. “Oh, he’s hurting me. I think my wrist’s broken. It’s all dark in here. I just wanted to see the necklace in the daylight. He’s a monster. The necklace isn’t worth what he’s asking for it. It’s a fake.”

“It’s not a fake. She tried to steal it. There’s no doubt at all,” the proprietor said to Nyoman.

“Okay, you two, stop right there. I’m sure there’s been a simple misunderstanding.” Nyoman was about to ask the blonde to explain what she’d been up to when, in the corner of his vision, he glimpsed a shadow moving. He peered into the murky depths of the shop, but saw nothing more. Perhaps he’d imagined it. No. He heard an almost imperceptible scraping sound.

“Nobody move.” He brushed along the row of gate guardian statues as he walked towards the far end of the shop. Reaching the back wall, he peered into the semi-darkness behind the counter. He cocked his head and listened. The faintest papery whisper of sound came from under the counter.

*“Bapak punya anjing, kucing?”* he asked the proprietor, who called out that he didn’t.

The rustling sounded again and Nyoman dove towards it. He hit his left knee on the side of the counter, flung his arms out and felt fabric swish through his hands. He stood up and felt around the edge of the counter with his fingers, skirting an open drawer.

A shadow detached itself from the darkness and disappeared towards the other side of the room.

Nyoman called out to the Australian man, “Let no one through the door.”

“They’ll have to kill me first,” the man shouted back.

“I saw something over by the statues,” the proprietor said.

The blonde let out a screech. “Gusti, where are you? Help me.” She kicked the store owner in the shin and he fell backwards, letting go of her. She ran down the center aisle of the shop towards the door, knocking over a display case. Glass splinters and broken jewelry showered the floor. The collision slowed her down enough for Nyoman to cut over from behind the counter and grab her by the waist. He hoisted her off the ground and held on tight.

She rolled and twisted like a cat. “Put me down. What’s wrong with you people, attacking an innocent tourist?”

“Where’s your accomplice?” Nyoman asked.

“I’ve got him right here, mate.” The Australian tourist held in a choke hold a writhing figure enveloped in a dark cloud. As he fought his captor, the black sheet the thief had been wearing as a kind of cloak of invisibility slipped to the floor to reveal a Balinese man in his twenties with a straggly beard and a surly expression.

The blonde raked Nyoman’s hand with long, blood-red nails. “I’ve never seen that man before.”

“Tell that to the police in a few minutes.” With one hand, Nyoman speed-dialed Chief Inspector Dewa Agung’s number. It sometimes helped to have attended high school with the senior local detective.

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The thieves having been taken into custody, Nyoman and the Australian tourist assisted the proprietor in cleaning up the wreckage.

“Tell me how you knew what was going on. It was so dark I couldn’t see a thing,” the Australian said.

“I didn’t see much. It was what I heard. The scraping of a drawer and a rustle of paper.”

“What did you ask the store owner?”

“I asked him if he had a dog or a cat. When he said ‘no,’ I knew what I’d heard was someone stealing the cash from the drawer under the counter.”

A woman’s voice shouted from the street. “Come on, Bill. I’m hungry. There’s nothing left to see.”

The Australian held up his hand, palm towards his female companion. “So what did the blonde have to do with it?”

“She was the distraction. She blatantly pretended to steal a necklace in order to lure the owner away from the cash drawer. While they were struggling, her partner crept around the counter and pocketed the money. He’d have been long gone by the time the police arrived to sort out the shoplifting. The cops would have come to the conclusion no crime had occurred, and the blonde would have disappeared into the crowd leaving the proprietor to discover his empty drawer.”

“*Terima kasih*, *Bapak*.” The owner put his hands together in the prayer position and bowed to Nyoman.

“No need to thank me. I’m a PI, it’s my job.”

“You’re a PI? Here in Bali?” the Australian tourist asked.

“I’m Bali’s only PI. Listen, we couldn’t have managed to take down the criminals without your help.”

“No worries, mate,” the man said.

“And in case you don’t need me in the capacity of a PI,” Nyoman said with a smile, “I’m also a taxi driver and tour guide. People say I’m pretty good at that, too.” Fingers crossed Sukadi would have the car fixed by evening so Nyoman could be out in it earning money first thing the next morning.

THE END

If you’ve enjoyed this sneak peak into the life of Nyoman Rai, Balinese private investigator, keep a look out for “The Monkey Forest Murders,” the first full-length novel in the Balinese Investigator series.