

1697

Rayleigh Edwards accompanies his cousin, Wethersby Thacker Jnr, across South and East Asia. They are tracking their grandfather's clues to find a mysterious jade casket, full of gems, the JackFruit Treasure.

But Wethersby's brothers are in hot pursuit, impatient to trap the hoard for themselves.

With his last breath, their grandfather whispered a warning, "It is a handsome treasure but cursed. Never be it grasped by any one man or one woman, for a long haunting death will surely follow..."



JACKFRUIT TREASURE TRAP  
MATTHEW BIRD

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A treacherous journey to uncover  
a precious family secret

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**[www.JackFruitTreasure.com](http://www.JackFruitTreasure.com)**

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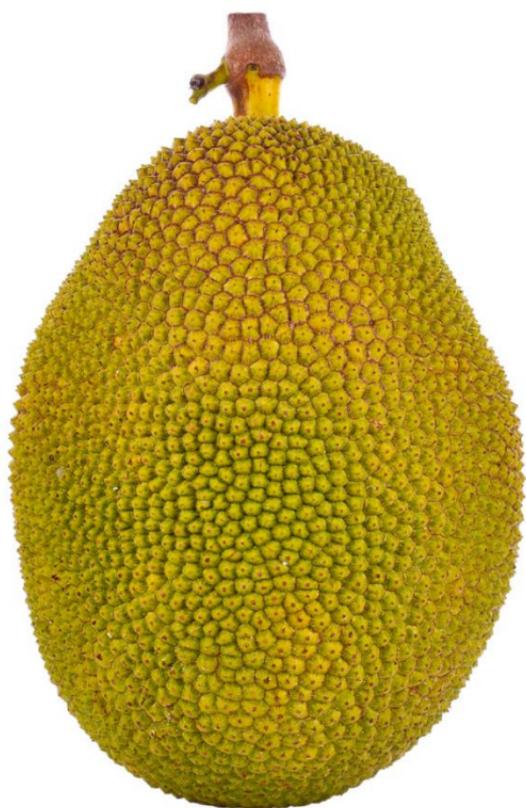
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*For my daughter, Malissa Maya, and my wife,  
Patcharaporn, you are the angels in my life.*



# JACKFRUIT

**T**he jackfruit (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*), also known as a jack tree, is a tree species in the fig, mulberry, and breadfruit family.

The jack tree is suited to tropical climates and is cultivated widely. It bears the largest fruit of all trees, reaching a whopping weight of 120 pounds, 35 inches in length, and 20 inches in diameter. A mature jack tree can produce two hundred fruits per year, with older trees up to five hundred. The jackfruit is composed of hundreds to thousands of individual fruit flowers. The edible ripe fruit is sweet and yellow, depending on variety, and is more often used for desserts. The fruit also contains hundreds of edible nuts.

The jackfruit is the national fruit of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka<sup>1</sup>. It is often called *kos* in Sri Lanka and has been enjoyed as a meal or a snack for many centuries.

<sup>1</sup> During the 16-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Sri Lanka was often known as the *Kingdom of Kandy*. The Kandyan Kingdom's territory typically dominated large parts of the island. References to *Kandy* within this book refer to the island as a whole.



# PROLOGUE

**W**ethersby Thacker ventured into the jungle with Maylong, a young Kandyan woman he met a week earlier on New Year's Day 1631. He thought she promised him a night of passion and a prize beyond his wildest imagination.

She spoke in her native tongue and shy English too. That was enough to draw him to her, along with emerald eyes, jet-black shiny long hair, and soft glowing sun-kissed skin. She showed him her intentions with her body and drew shapes in the dirt of a key, the sun, and the moon, chattering in a language he failed to understand but longed to hear and know more. He could barely contain his hands and did not want to stop looking into her stunning eyes.

They set off by mid-afternoon from Kali in a wooden cart pulled by water buffalo. They slowly made their way down dusty and rutted paths among dense avenues of mango trees. The bone-shaking ride from the southern town took them six hours or thereabouts. That night a three-quarter moon glowed, and a sky full of bright stars lit their way. Eventually, they reached a small remote grotto, lit from the outside by simple flickering flames.

Maylong startled Wethersby by jumping from the wagon before it came to a halt.

“Come!” she teased, running. “Let go before someone sees.”

Once they made their way inside, dozens of tiny lanterns smoked, and a robust fragrance of burning coconut oil settled all around. Within an inner recess was a compact sanctuary. An unnatural soft lime glow drew them deeper. The light became intense as Maylong and Wethersby shielded their eyes, bowed their heads for the lowering roof, then shuffled on dusty knees. It was uncomfortable for him; he disliked the closeness of the walls and the lack of clear air. After fifty yards or so, the vault opened, and the glimmering shifted to a golden hue.

The inner cavern felt cold and smelt musty. It was full of razor-sharp needles of rock hanging from above. To one side, a small lagoon emitted a beam from below its surface.

Without hesitation, Maylong unravelled her sarong and dived in. Wethersby, initially shocked by her lack of modesty, quickly followed her lead. The water was crisp, refreshing, and incredibly soft; it ran off their skin, not a drop would stick. They could not stand upright in its centre, although a shelf below the edge brought some relief.

Lying on their backs, they viewed the ceiling. Its colour slowly alternated in power, but there were no candles nor other distinct sources to identify the eerie lights. They lay there for many minutes, mesmerised by the cave’s features.

Placing a finger firmly on Wethersby’s open mouth, Maylong whispered, “No talk, rocks drop.” In confident and perfect London English, she added, “the treasure you seek is all about you.”

Wethersby was astonished.

## JACKFRUIT TREASURE TRAP

Over an hour later, filled with no conversation other than romancing, they stepped out from the pool and settled down to sleep on the uneven, dusty floor. Wethersby was awoken by a dull thud, followed by a bouncing echo, but he could only see dust. Maylong stirred and wrapped her arm around his chest; he did the same, and they lapsed into sleep.

The luminescence from the water had died when they woke, so too the radiance from the ceiling. Wethersby, though, felt sure the lights were shining as he opened his eyes, but all he could see was phosphorescence in the backwash of his vision. Gradually, the pool began to flicker and glow afresh.

“There is something special in this well,” she said softly.

“I know. I felt it too,” replied Wethersby.

“No. Precious stones in a large box,” exclaimed Maylong, her raised voice jumping off the cavern’s walls. “Please, dive deep with me, and let us bring the strongbox up.”

Maylong went in first. Wethersby followed. He struggled to keep up with her as his lungs tightened, and in less than a minute, he came up to guzzle air. She remained below for over five minutes more; he grew increasingly anxious. When she surfaced, at last, Maylong just smiled and breathed normally.

“Mister Wethersby, you need to concentrate and keep your breath,” she told him. “Hang on tight to my foot, and I will guide you, but unless you get deep quick enough, you will not see the void to squeeze through. To bring the box out, we must move it in three stages, for it is heavy, even within water; no one can move it alone.”

He smiled, dazzled by her calmness, authority, and those piercing eyes.

They plunged underwater on three more occasions until Wethersby called time; he was exhausted. He vaguely saw the small gap contour and got close on occasion but could not kick

enough to swim down and get decent leverage. He could sense Maylong's frustration with him.

"It is too difficult for me down there," he puffed. "Can we have another short rest to recharge?"

"You need to practise patience and concentration," she said, resisting his request. "You can do this; you have power in your body; it is in your mind where you need to focus."

Eyes shut, they tried to relax and take a nap, but sleep did not come. Soon Wethersby unconsciously wrapped his legs around Maylong's, and they united as one again.

"See, you can concentrate when you want to, but I fear now you may be lacking some vitality," she giggled.

Maylong jumped back into the pool.

He sat up smiling and watched her dance playfully in the water. Another thud shattered their silence. Wethersby instinctively flinched as a stalactite fell to the ground. The space around them got quickly encased in dust. He felt his heart racing again but now from trepidation. As the air cleared, she got out of the water.

"This time, we must get through to the other side; you must focus and hold on. Our cave is unstable; look at the mess the rock has created and how the needles are dropping," said Maylong, pointing to the corner of the cave where the rock had just fallen. "They are shifting to our movements."

When they dived into the water together, Wethersby kicked hard and steadily. Despite his unease and sense of foreboding, he found the hollow and followed Maylong, still squeezing her big toe. After scratching himself several times along the cramped tunnel, he reached its end and rapidly aimed up towards a dull shimmer.

He broke the surface ahead of her and gasped. Hundreds of tiny lights covered the bare walls and ceiling. There was not enough room to stand upright, even for Maylong, twelve

inches shorter than Wethersby. The dense musty scent was almost overpowering.

Wethersby tread water while staring at an oblong casket of milky-green and blackened jade. He was so close that his breath reached its gold key and elaborate gilded lock, making it glisten all the more. He guessed the uneven seamless box was weighty, about three feet long, twenty inches high, and twenty inches deep.

“What is innermost will take your breath away,” Maylong said softly and added, “but this place is haunted.”

She pointed behind him. He whirled around. Four eye sockets protruding from a pair of skulls stared back at them. Instinctively he pushed backwards, his head hitting the lock, and he scratched the back of his crown.

The heavily cracked, but intact, heads were a dark yellowish-brown. More old bones lay scattered behind, tangled together with fragments of multi-coloured cloth.

“I want to see inside the box,” he said eagerly.

“Unlock it and take a look, but be quick before this air turns sour,” Maylong replied.

The pungent sweet odour hit him first; the lights turned lemony. A mass of crystals lay crammed within a white sticky mess. His eyes nearly popped out of his head; he held a substantial yellow rock-crystal, overflowing in his warmed and tacky palm. After rummaging the chest, he untangled two other rocks that were more significant than the first. He counted at least two dozen smaller cut gems, thinking the principal stones may have been sapphire or diamond, but he was not sure.

“An enormous green casing, full of sweet and golden forbidden fruits. A *JackFruit Treasure!*” Wethersby pronounced as he stashed the first crystal in his pocket.

“Come on, Mister Wethersby, we must go quickly. We do not want the same fate as these two,” whispered Maylong slowly as her voice echoed. “Returning is not so easy. We need to get out of the water, then dive from our knees to gain pace. You go first.”

With a resounding splash, he headed back towards the passage. He struggled to pull his way through as the stone scraped along the coarse edge. He felt a searing pain across his thigh and his breeches shredding. The tunnel had snared him. He began to panic, wanting to scream.

Maylong pushed hard against his waving feet, setting him free. He rushed up to the surface and gulped hard for air.

His breeches were in tatters, the stone gone.

--X--

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## BIO



*Matthew Bird*

**B**orn in 1966 in Fife, Scotland, and brought up in Suffolk, England, Matt travelled extensively in-between his work for BOC Gases and Linde. Now retired, Matt resides in Thailand with his wife, Pat, and their young daughter, Malissa.

A mathematician, and a bit of a perfectionist, he loves some of the simple pleasures of life and is often seen watering and weeding their garden farm - and eating the produce.

In May 2020, leaping into the unknown, Matt began writing for pleasure, inspired by Sunday Times best-selling author Michael Heppell and his team of budding authors on the Write That Book programme.

Matt's first fiction book, *JackFruit Treasure Trap*, subtly combines his passions of family and travel; he secretly wants to be one of the pirates.

His Suffolk born seven- and five-times great-grandfathers were both named *Wethersby Thacker*. Matt's dear uncle, *Rayleigh Edward Bird*, was a merchant seaman on the SS *Oriana* during the 1950-70s and inspired Matt to 'get out and see the world'.

