

*Welcome*

A Novel

and

**Women's Rights and Prostitution in Thailand**

An Exegesis

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## Statement of Originality

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## **Abstract**

### **The Novel**

*Welcome* is the story of four young women whose different life trajectories intersect in the bars and brothels of Thailand. Salisa is a Thai prostitute who grows up in a small village outside of Chiang Mai, in the north west of Thailand. When she is sixteen, Salisa's parents ask her to take a job as a waitress in a restaurant in Bangkok that is owned by a woman from their village. In fact, the job is as a prostitute in a bar in Patpong, Bangkok's notorious red light district, where she is expected to earn enough money to support her family. There she meets Mali, (Thai for 'little flower'), a shy, quirky young woman who becomes her best friend and partner in life.

Salisa and Mali work together, at first to avoid and later to come to terms with the occupation to which their respective economic situations have led them. Salisa finds strength in her determination that through her work and the money she sends home, her younger sister Khwan will be protected from the same fate.

The novel follows Salisa and Mali from Bangkok to Phuket to Koh Samui as they attempt to improve their circumstances within the world of prostitution, and as they ultimately attempt to retire and enter the world of 'legitimate' work. Along the way, Mali attempts to retire by marrying an old Australian businessman, but finds herself just as trapped by marriage to a Westerner as she was trapped by her job. Salisa falls in love with a customer despite her best efforts and is slowly drawn into a web of financial and emotional exploitation.

The first-person narrator of the book is Lara, an Australian academic who has travelled to Thailand to research women's rights and prostitution. Lara retells Salisa and Mali's story as she hears it, all the while becoming closer to the women and further drawn into their lives, much to the distress of her supportive husband, Aidan. In the first half of the book, Salisa and Mali's story alternates with images of Lara in the present, her views of the two women, and her insights into contemporary Thailand—and its culture of 'sex tourism'—as seen through Western eyes. In the

second half, Salisa's sister Khwan is kidnapped by criminals who run a closed brothel, drawing Lara, Salisa and Mali back to Bangkok to find her.

*Welcome* is a realist novel that provides an honest picture of the harsh realities and subtle beauty of the lives of those Thai women who work as prostitutes serving the tourist market.

### **The Exegesis**

Throughout Southeast Asia, every year, millions of girls and women are sold or forced into prostitution and sex slavery. There are two distinct but interconnected markets for prostitution in the region: local men and foreigners. Thailand is well known for its sex trade targeted at western men (known as *farang*), who holiday in Bangkok, Pattaya and Phuket in great numbers every year for the purpose of hiring prostitutes. The novel and exegesis aim to examine the issues of women's rights and gender roles in Thailand through an examination of prostitution and its effect on Thai women, using fiction as the medium to tell the story of these women to an Australian audience. The exegesis supports the purpose of the novel by providing the historical, cultural and sociological context of the industry in which these women work.

# Welcome: A Novel

## Chapter One

We have been in Thailand for two weeks, and I still haven't worked up the guts to talk to anyone about prostitution. 'Don't worry, honey', my husband yells over the spluttering of a passing scooter, 'I'm sure we'll find some prostitutes for you tonight'. He is covering his arms with insect repellent as we walk down the busy main street in Chaweng. 'To talk to', he adds. I smile distractedly. I've just found what I've been looking for.

There is a neon sign barely attached to a tin roof, a band of yellow encircling the words 'Happy Nights', which glow pink. A white martini glass with a green olive flashes on and off. There are only four Thai women inside the small bar, one sitting and playing Connect Four with a middle-aged American man at one of the small tables, another woman behind the bar cleaning glasses, and two more playing pool together at the weathered table in the centre of the bar. I don't know why I have a good feeling about this bar, or why I decide that this is the place we'll try tonight.

The women playing pool get my attention. We pause on the street, looking in, and I try not to stare noticeably. One of the women is lighter skinned, lighter haired, and seems just ineffably lighter; she floats around the table, mostly silent, lines up her shots, sometimes misses and sometimes sinks. Her friend isn't like that: you can hear her cue smashing into every shot, hear her muttered curses. There's an iridescent butterfly clip holding back her smooth black hair. Her dark-skinned arms with small but toned muscles are shown off by her sleeveless, tight white top, her fingers tensed around the pool cue. Since I have a tattoo of an elephant on my ankle,



I notice the louder woman's tattoo on the back of her left shoulder, one of the most beautiful tattoos I've seen: three cute pink cartoon elephants in a circle. Her friend moves around the table with her and says nothing; the darker woman does all the talking. I see that her friend has a similar tattoo in the same place: three small butterflies. It makes me wonder if they are sisters.

Suddenly, the darker woman is looking right at Aidan and me. She becomes quiet; slowly, she smiles. I bite my lip. Is she a prostitute? Of course, I know not every woman who works in a bar is a bargirl. But if she is, she's a popular one.

'Welcome, please come inside.' She puts down the cue and rushes to grab some drink menus from the back. She herds us to a table and I climb up on the stool, dropping my bag to the ground.

Aidan takes off his hat and runs a hand through his hair. 'Do I have hat hair?' He's been sweating into his hat all day and his brown hair now sits flat, stuck to his head.

'You look fine', I lie.

'What would you like to drink?' the dark woman asks as she hands us the menus. They're printed on A4 paper in plastic sleeves, the pages held together by string. I'm sure there'll be no juice on the menu and there isn't. There's nothing non-alcoholic without sugar.

'We'll have to drink alcohol', I tell Aidan. 'We'll keep it to wine. It's the least of all alcoholic evils.'

'Will you be okay with wine?' he asks.

'Why would I not be okay with wine?' I shoot back, but I smile. 'It's not *drinking* drinking. It's in the interest of research.'

He doesn't say anything to that, just grunts. His hat hair really does look terrible.

The menu only says 'white wine' and 'red wine', while it lists an abundance of choices for beer, spirits and cocktails. At two hundred baht a glass, or eight dollars Australian, wine is the most expensive thing listed on the menu.

'Can we buy you a drink? And for your friend too?' I gesture with an open hand to the other young woman, who is still playing pool.

'Of course', she says, not totally hiding her surprise. She goes back to the bar and relays our order.

Aidan looks at me with wide blue eyes. 'Quick, pull those other chairs over', I tell him. 'Maybe they'll sit down with us.'

'This must be the right bar', he says quietly.

The woman places the wine glasses in front of us with a small smile, and returns to the bar to retrieve two glasses of Coke, which she balances on the side of the pool table. She reconsiders, walks over to us and sits down in one of the chairs Aidan has pulled over.

'*Shan chuer* Lara', I say. My name is Lara. We always try to speak what little Thai we know. Usually Thai people smile at us and reply in English.

'My name is Salisa', she says in English.

We repeat the *wai* we had given to each other upon our arrival at the bar. A *wai* is the traditional Thai greeting, like a little bow with your palms pressed together as if in prayer.

'And this is my husband, Aidan', I continue.

I wonder, as I say this, if she thinks we want to take her home with us and have sex with her. If she's a prostitute, she might have encountered couples like that.

I don't know how to reassure her it isn't the case here. Suddenly, the strange confidence I felt when we entered the bar slips away from me and I sip at my foul-tasting wine—wine has never been my drink of choice and this wine is not going to change my mind—and I try to think of how I'm going to ask this woman to tell me about prostitution.

Why do I find it so hard to ask about prostitution? For one, it's a sensitive subject. Prostitution is illegal in Thailand, yet a great deal of the tourism industry depends on it. Millions of women and girls in Thailand and throughout South East Asia work as prostitutes, and millions of men are customers. It's said that some women who work as prostitutes do so by choice. This is especially the case for women who work in the bars. It's hard to imagine what other 'choices' they have.

No one talks about choice when it comes to sex slaves. The trafficking of women and children is rife. Women and girls are kidnapped, tricked and sold into sex slavery every day. These are the women and girls in 'closed brothels', where they live and work, unable to leave until they have paid back the money the brothel owner incurs to 'buy' and 'support' them: their 'debt'. Some stay until they are no longer making a profit for the brothel, and they're turned out. Others stay until they die, often at a young age due to sexually transmitted disease or untreated medical conditions.

How does someone like me find her way into that world, the world of closed brothels and outright sex slavery, forced prostitution by the Thai people and, mostly, for the Thai people? These aspects of prostitution are so secretive, so illegal, so horrific that I wouldn't know where to begin researching. I wouldn't even know how to find such closed brothels, let alone enter them to talk to the women and girls

inside. Certainly none of the ‘customers’ would talk to me. It’s a world I can never enter, light years away from my safe, academic life.

All I can hope for is to learn something about the prostitution aimed at the foreign market: ‘sex tourism’, as it is euphemistically known. Compared to the women in closed brothels, the Thai prostitutes who cater to Western tourists, who work the bars in areas like Bangkok, Pattaya, Phuket and Koh Samui, are ‘privileged’ among their profession. These women choose when, where and with whom they work. Their conditions are comparatively better.

But it’s still prostitution. It’s still hard for me to find a way to ask what I need to ask, to find a way in.

Salisa starts talking first. ‘Is this your first trip to Thailand?’

‘No’, I smile. I love answering this question. ‘This is our fourth trip. We come to Thailand every year in December, for our anniversary. We spent our honeymoon on Samui three years ago.’

‘Oh, congratulations! And how long are you staying in Thailand?’

‘We’ve been here for two weeks. In two more weeks, Aidan has to go home to Australia. But I’ll be staying in Thailand for two more months after that. Maybe three.’

‘You’ll stay by yourself?’ She looks incredulous. ‘Why?’

‘For my research. I’m writing a book about Thailand, for my university.’

‘Oh, you are a professor?’

‘I’m only a lecturer’, I say, ‘but close enough’.

‘And you are a professor, too?’ She looks at Aidan.

‘I’m a physio’, smiles Aidan. ‘A physiotherapist.’

‘Ooohh. Like a doctor? Same same?’

‘No.’ He doesn’t elaborate. Just smiles again.

‘Ah.’ Salisa turns back to me. ‘What will you write about Thailand?’

This is the moment when it could be safe to ask her about prostitution, if I want. ‘I’m writing about what it’s like to be a woman in Thailand’, I say instead. ‘I want to learn about Thai women’s lives.’

‘It is *hard* to be a woman in Thailand’, Salisa says. ‘Much harder than it is to be a man. Have you heard of a *gig*?’

‘*Gig*?’ I repeat, trying to mimic the tone of the Thai word. ‘What is a *gig*?’

‘A Thai man may have a girlfriend. Then he may have a *gig*, or two or three *gig*, on the side, to sleep with. Many men have a *gig*.’

‘It’s like a *mia noi*?’ I ask. ‘A second wife?’

‘This is not seen as a bad thing like a *mia noi*. Many people see *mia noi* as bad now. It isn’t like before. But a *gig* is completely normal. It is seen as cute. By some people.’

She sips her Coke through her straw and smiles at the same time. ‘And when a man gets a woman pregnant, he can just leave her, and the woman is seen as at fault. Then she has to take care of the baby by herself, with no help. In Australia, do they have laws to protect the woman?’

‘Yes’, I say. ‘If a man leaves a woman with a baby, he still has to pay to help look after the child until it’s eighteen. It’s called child support.’

‘That’s good’, she nods vigorously. ‘We don’t have that.’

Salisa sits with us for a long time, telling me all kinds of things, mostly random information on no particular theme, just whatever pops into her head about the relationship between women and men in Thailand. I tell her about Australia,

whether things are better or worse for women there in relation to particular points; generally they're better. Aidan mostly keeps his mouth shut and nods in agreement with all the negative things Salisa and I say about his gender.

I want to ask Salisa about herself, but I feel like I can't yet. I like her, though. A lot.

The American playing Connect Four orders beer after beer, and with each one he moves closer to the Thai woman at his side. He puts his hand on her knee, then moves it higher up her leg. He seems unsure at first as to how physical he can be with her in the bar, especially as their table is at the front, practically in the street. As the evening wears on, he becomes less unsure. He is drinking, and the parade of old, white men who paw their young Thai companions as they walk together down the street never stops. Eventually the American drapes himself over the young woman, whispers in her ear over the stacks of Connect Four discs. She looks uncomfortable, at least to me, but she is a professional; she does a good job of feigning interest. Maybe because there aren't many customers around tonight to choose from.

'Would you like another drink, Salisa? And one for your friend?'

'Thank you, *Khun* Lara. And for you?'

'Just water, please.'

She hurries to retrieve the drinks. As I'd hoped, she brings her friend, who has long since stopped playing pool and moved to the front of the bar to bring Westerners in with a 'welcome'. Now here they both are, sitting in the chairs with us. There's something about both of them that I'm drawn to: the way they act like they are sisters, although they don't look related. Salisa looks tougher, like someone who is always in charge. Her friend looks more delicate. Her hair is light brown in places, darker in others. Maybe it's dyed. She smiles and looks like she's lost in a dream.

‘This is my friend, Mali’, says Salisa. ‘She was married to an Australian and she lived in your country, but she came home.’

‘My name means little flower.’ Mali smiles, a little like she’s flirting. ‘Do you think it suits me?’

I want to hear more about Mali’s marriage to the Australian, but Salisa picks up where she left off, telling us everything she can think of about women in Thailand. She seems so happy to be helpful, and shoots me a bright smile every time I note down something she says or ask her more about it. Mali stays quiet, smiles and lets Salisa speak.

When he gets up from his chair, the drunken American knocks over the Connect Four game and sends the pieces flying. He doesn’t seem embarrassed, just staggers to the bar at the back and pays his bill. He looks over his shoulder at the woman still sitting at his table, straightening her clothes and fixing her hair. He points to her. He hands the woman behind the bar a one thousand baht note. The bartender gives him back five hundred.

‘You’re looking at the customer’, says Salisa.

Aidan flinches and suddenly my skin is cold. ‘I was wondering what cost five hundred baht’, Aidan says slowly.

‘He just paid the bar fine for Joy’, Salisa explains. ‘That means she can leave work at the bar and go with the man tonight. If he wants sex, he has to pay Joy. The price depends on if he wants a short time or a long time. For a short time, maybe fifteen hundred baht. For all night, maybe three thousand baht.’ She says all this in the same happy and instructive tone she has been using all evening. Mali smiles and says nothing.

‘That’s only sixty dollars’, says Aidan. ‘Or a hundred and twenty dollars, I guess, for the whole night. But he pays twice?’ he asks.

I’m still somewhat stunned that we’re talking about it. In particular, I can’t believe it’s Aidan who is asking Salisa these questions.

‘Of course he has to pay twice: once to the bar and once to her’, explains Salisa. ‘If he takes her home tonight, she’s not working, is she? She’s not getting people to buy drinks and lady drinks. So the bar’s losing money.’

‘She has sex with a man for money’, Aidan says, ‘but she’s somehow not working?’

‘She’s not working for the bar’, corrects Salisa.

‘It’s important to think about the bar’, Mali chimes in. ‘If the bar doesn’t get paid, no one has a job at all.’

‘Bangkok has the same system, with the bar fines. It’s the same everywhere. But the tips are better here. The customers have more money, I think. That’s why I like it better, working in Samui.’ Salisa slurps the last of her Coke through the straw and grins a little at the noise.

Neither of them has openly said they work as prostitutes themselves. I wonder if I can ask. We’ve been sitting here for hours, not buying as many drinks as we probably should be, and Mali has excused herself to play pool with some other customers. Salisa has politely stayed talking to us the whole time. I wonder how much money she’s out for doing so.

‘We’re tired’, I say to her.

‘We are?’ asks Aidan.

‘Can we get our bill?’



As Salisa goes over to the bar to collect it, a youngish, fairly good-looking man walks into the bar and straight up to Mali at the pool table. She greets him with a *wai*, then a hug and a kiss on the cheek. She seems much less reserved as she immediately excuses herself from the game and hurries behind the bar to collect her bright green plastic handbag and tiny jacket. The man hands over five hundred baht to the owner. With their arms around each other's waists, Mali and her man leave the bar, hop onto a shiny white Isuzu scooter, and disappear down the road.

'That looked like Mali's boyfriend picking her up from work', I whisper to Aidan. 'Except he paid her bar fine.'

Salisa returns with the bill. It's one thousand, two hundred baht for four glasses of vile white wine and four 'lady drinks'. It's the most expensive bill we've received on Samui, except for the time we visited a fancy health resort on the other side of the island, where we ate a three-course meal in our own private hut overlooking the beach and a waterfall. Salisa excuses herself while we take our change, leaving us to tip in private, as is customary. We leave a five hundred baht tip, way more than is expected.

'Who was that man with Mali?' I ask as we stand up and push in our bar stools.

'Her new boyfriend from Germany', Salisa replies. 'He comes to meet her most nights now, for two weeks. Only one more week and he goes home.'

'Her boyfriend?' I ask.

'Not a real boyfriend. He pays for sex', Salisa clarifies, smiling. I smile back at her. 'You'll come back again tomorrow?' she asks as we leave. This is a standard question in Thailand. It's polite to say yes, even if you don't mean it. It's very nice, sometimes, to mean it.

We find a *song theow* that will take us back to our rented villa. We climb up onto the back of the ute, and scramble to sit down on one of the long benches before it jerks to a start. I hold onto one of the bars on the roof of the cab that covers the ute's tray, turning it into something of a big *tuk-tuk*.

'I love her', I shout to Aidan from the opposite bench. 'I love Salisa, and I love Mali. And I want to go back tomorrow.'

'You love them?' Aidan shouts back, scrunching up his face against the dust getting in his eyes. 'Should I worry?'

As soon as we get back to the villa, I start going through all the paperwork stacked up on my makeshift desk, pulling out the consent forms, the participant information sheets, everything that needs to be put in order for the interviews. Of course they'll agree to be interviewed. Of course I'll start to find out what I want to know. The mattress is rock hard and Aidan is half-snoring on his side next to me and I don't care. The world that was closed to me is opening up a little and I fall asleep to the squawking sound of the giant tokay lizards talking to each other on the walls outside.

## Chapter Two

We spend our days in our hillside villa trying to improve our Thai, reading the second-hand books we bought in Lamai. I have been reading anything I can get my hands on that is even remotely connected to women's rights and prostitution in Thailand. Aidan is reading junk and trying to help. I hope he is having a good time. This is, after all, his holiday. Only I am supposed to be working.

The villa is perched on the top of a mountain, in the middle of the jungle but not too far from the main road. It's old and filled with tacky cane furniture, but it's like a five-star hotel in comparison to the homes most Thai people live in. We are surrounded by tall, thin coconut trees, and through them we can see all the way down the mountain to the bright blue ocean.

When we first arrived on Koh Samui, after the sticky, sweaty trip from the airport to our accommodation, I was disappointed to find that the mattress here is as hard as always. There are lounge chairs on the balcony at the front of the house that stay outdoors all year round. What was unexpected was the kitchen, which is outside. We couldn't believe there is no lock on the kitchen door. We didn't know if our stuff would be safe. Smiling, we realised we would only be leaving food in the kitchen. If anyone stole food, we reasoned, they needed it more than us. We are such understanding Westerners; we have such an appreciation for the plight of the Thai people. On some level, we know we have no idea.

When we leave the villa, we turn on all the outside lights, so we will be able to see the giant lizards when we return late at night. They climb on the walls just

above our heads. We are almost as scared of them as Thai children are, even though we don't believe the story that if we are naughty, they will eat our livers.

'I can't wait to get back to Chaweng tonight', I tell Aidan. 'I've got a good feeling about Salisa. Really good.' It's four p.m. but I am slathering sunscreen on anyway. No matter what time it is, if the sun is out, I get burnt. He throws some Band-Aids and another pack of tissues into my bag. The tissues serve as toilet paper almost everywhere we go.

When we leave our villa, my handbag full of emergency supplies slung over my shoulder, walking down the driveway we lovingly call 'the cliff face', Aidan and I smile and *wai* to the hotel's cleaners we pass on the way down. They laugh good naturedly and smile at how difficult we find it to walk up and down the steep road. They practically skip as they go.

'*Sawadee ka, sabai dee mai ka?*' I say hello; I ask them how they are.

'*Sabai dee ka, korb kun ka, khun la ka?*' They're well; they want to know how I am. It's a standard question.

'*Sabai dee ka! Pob gan mai!*' I'm well; I'll see them later. I learnt only yesterday how to tell people I'll see them later.

At the side of Ring Road, the main road that runs all the way around Samui in a circle, we wait for a *song theow* to approach, to take us back to Salisa's bar, where I hope I will have the courage to talk to her directly, in detail, about prostitution.

I've just finished my first year as a women's studies lecturer in Adelaide. During my interview, when the selection committee asked what I wanted my research focus to be if I were hired, I told them I wanted to study women's rights in Thailand through the lens of prostitution. I wonder sometimes if I won them over by

saying they wouldn't have to completely fund my field trips, since I go every year for a month anyway. I did end up with a small grant for early career researchers in any case. Once hired, I spent the whole year studying my subject. Now that I'm here, I see that for all I've read, I know nothing about women's rights in Thailand—not *really*. I know lots of *things*, lots of facts, but that's all. I don't know anything real about prostitution or about these people's lives. I don't understand anything about it down to the bone, the way that they do. I'm beginning to think I never will. I've been worrying I've made an unwise decision.

The driver beeps at us and we hail him down.

'Where are you going?' he asks through his window.

'Chaweng. *Tow rai*?'

'One hundred baht each.'

'*Pang pai*, too expensive', I say, even though one hundred baht is only four dollars. '*Ha sip* baht, fifty baht each.'

I have a habit of saying something in Thai and then saying it in English straight after, a kill-two-birds approach. Most Thai people speak English much, much better than I speak Thai. I comfort myself with the knowledge that this deficiency isn't unique to me, but something I share with almost all the tourists here.

He agrees to our price and waves for us to get in. We thank him. Fifty baht is the standard price during the day for tourists taking a *song theow* from Lamai to Chaweng, but we always have to barter anyway. Brand new tourists to Thailand will often just pay the first price they are told. We hated bartering at first, since we felt it was rude to talk Thai people down in price. We're used to it now.

Since Happy Nights won't be open yet, we go to the massage parlour that we visit on every trip. The four women who work there are sitting at a concrete table in

front of the shop, eating a meal together out of plastic containers. I see the rice and vegetables, and smell the familiar sauces. I don't know what any of them are called. They smile and greet us with a *wai*.

'You're back again!' Every year they recognise us. 'Happy honeymoon!' She means happy anniversary. We take our shoes off and go inside.

Today has been long, hard and hot, so sitting down for a foot massage is a relief, but my day hasn't been as long or as hard as that of the woman who is about to give me my massage. Her name is Sai, pronounced 'see'. I asked her how to spell it the first time we met. She has dark, smooth skin and strong hands. She smiles with her whole body. She looks as if she is as old as me, twenty-seven, but I've never asked her age.

She is from a small village in Isaan, in the northeast of Thailand. There is almost no work there for anyone except farmers, and the farmers struggle. Three years ago, Sai had no choice but to leave her son in the care of her mother and move away to find work so she could earn enough money to support them. Her son was three years old when she first left home. Now he is six and going to school. She can only afford to visit him once a year, for two weeks. The rest of the time, she works twelve hours a day, seven days a week in the massage parlour to send as much money as she can home. One of the first times we talked, I told her how beautiful I thought the beaches were on Samui. She doesn't get to go to the beach. She is always working.

'Do you miss your son?' I ask. It is an obvious, silly question.

'Yes, very much.' She smiles. 'But I call him every day.' She gestures to her mobile phone on a chair behind her.

'Lucky mobile phone calls are cheap in Thailand.'

‘No. Very expensive. So much money for calls!’ says Sai.

I bought a phone when we arrived. I use it to send and receive email, to text and make phone calls to Australia. It costs less than a quarter of the price of my mobile at home. Whether something in Thailand is expensive or cheap all depends on if you earn dollars or baht.

‘What about your rent?’ I ask. ‘Is that expensive?’

‘No, I live for free in a room here.’ She points up towards the ceiling. ‘With everyone, three other ladies.’

‘Free?’

‘Yes, but I have to work for twelve hours a day, no pay. Only paid for massage. Not paid to stay here and wait for customers. If no customers, no pay.’

‘How much do you get paid for massages?’

‘Half. Your massage, two hundred baht. One hundred for me, one hundred for owner.’

‘How many customers have you had today?’

‘Only three today. Slow day.’

December is the peak season for tourists. It’s six p.m. and she’s been working for eight hours already, and she’s earned three hundred baht. That’s twelve dollars. That’s a dollar fifty an hour, one hundred and twenty six dollars a week. How many customers would she have on average per day? I keep adding up numbers in my head, trying to factor in the busiest and slowest periods. It doesn’t matter. It all adds up to crap-all money.

‘Plus tips’, Sai says with a little smile. ‘I get to keep my tips.’

I sit back in the chair, my left leg resting on a stool, my right leg in Sai’s lap as she kneads my calves a little painfully. Aidan is lying on his stomach on a

massage table next to me, breathing heavily while his masseuse digs her elbows into his back. He tends to fall asleep during massages. My massage is less relaxing when I distract Sai by talking to her. I'm not really paying two hundred baht for a massage, I'm paying so I can have an hour to talk with a Thai woman without feeling nervous.

When I leave, I give Sai a five hundred baht tip. It doesn't make me feel better. As we walk away down the crowded street, I think about Sai paying for her food and her mobile phone, and sending the rest of her wages back home—and it's never enough.

Most afternoons for the last two weeks, Aidan and I have walked up and down the streets of Lamai, Chaweng, Bophut and Nathon, all the busiest parts of the island of Koh Samui. We always find friendly Thai people to talk to. Someone's always happy to have a conversation with us: at the Western-style restaurants, the cheap food carts, the millions of stalls along the main road in Chaweng, the Tesco shopping centre, the massage parlours and, of course, the bars. We find people who will speak to us in English and let us practice our Thai. We find people who will talk to us about their lives, about Thailand, about the King, about the stray dogs, about anything we ask them about, really.

Before last night, I hadn't talked to any of them about prostitution. We see it everywhere. In five minutes, anywhere we go, we see maybe ten old, white men walk past with young, beautiful Thai women, holding hands. No one seems to find it disgusting; everyone, both Thais and *farang*, acts as if this is completely normal.

Everywhere we go, there are bars. Some are big but mostly they're small, filled with smiling, sexy Thai women. They all wear the clothes that I see for sale in the markets that are for Thai people, not tourists. The prices are cheaper and the sizes



are smaller. Much smaller. If a Thai woman is considered thin in her country, then she probably looks like a twelve-year-old girl in Australia. They wear tiny t-shirts and tiny shorts or short dresses. All their clothes are tight fitting and brightly coloured. They wear big, cheap jewellery. They look beautiful and happy all of the time. Vibrant. They always look like they're having fun. They probably aren't.

If the women aren't already occupied with a customer, they're watching for tourists walking past. They yell 'Welcome!' to encourage us to come inside. There are many different kinds of 'welcomes'. Some are soft and pleasant as we walk close by, and the women smile at us. Others are perfunctory, spoken by women who don't even look up at us. Others are shouted at the top of their voices if we're on the other side of the road or have walked past before they notice. It always sounds like a song: '*Welcooome.*'

It isn't only the bargirls who welcome tourists to earn their living. We hear the same welcome as we pass by restaurants, massage parlours, stalls and shops. Everyone wants us to come inside and buy something, even if they only ask us to 'just have a look'. Everyone on this island relies on money from tourists to live. I wonder sometimes how welcome we really are.

In the heavy, humid air of Chaweng, we pass a t-shirt shop, a bag shop, a tailor, a souvenir shop, a restaurant, a massage parlour, a t-shirt shop, a bag shop, a tailor, a souvenir shop, a restaurant, a massage parlour, on and on. I take it all in, breathe deeply, and smile at everyone I see, except the tailors. If you even look at the tailors, they grab your hand and try to draw you into a lengthy conversation from which it is incredibly difficult to extricate yourself. They are the hardest sellers here, and they can pick anyone's nationality from metres away; a tactic they use to start conversations. I don't know how they do it.

‘Hi, you Aussie? G’day, mate. Vegemite.’

‘*No hablo inglés*’, we said one time as we passed a tailor with his outstretched hand.

‘*Hola*’, he replied. ‘*Hablo español*’.

We gave up after that, and now just walk past them as quickly as we can, saying ‘*Mai ow*’, I don’t want, and shaking our heads.

The air feels different to me in Thailand. Easier to breathe. Aidan says it’s just because of the humidity, but that isn’t it. It’s me; I’m different. More relaxed. I feel comfortable. Less like I’m being judged or watched all the time, like the way it feels at home. By whom I don’t know. I noticed it the first time we came here. It’s easier to feel like myself on Samui. More like my real self, I mean. How I see myself. How I was before hard work and climbing the academic ladder turned me into the person I am now when I’m in Australia.

How long has it been since I’ve felt this way? Since high school, maybe; since I decided for sure that being a lecturer was what I wanted. I was so scared of getting older; I wanted to do everything I possibly could before I turned thirty. Get married, buy a house, finish my PhD, get the job as a lecturer that I’d dreamed of. Now that I’ve done all that, all before thirty, I don’t remember why I was so scared of getting older. I don’t feel *older*. What I feel at home, in the life I’ve built for myself in Australia, is *more*. More accomplished, sure. More grown up, maybe. But mainly more stressed. More anxious. More clenched.

How many other *farang* feel more at home in Thailand than they do in their own countries? At the end of our first trip, I didn’t want to go back home. Every time I return, it is harder and harder to leave. I love it too much. I always want to stay and live my life here instead. I breathe in the air tonight and it feels refreshing and

liberating. It is the same air the Thai people who have lived here all their lives in poverty breathe, I know. I'm sure it doesn't feel the same to them.

Chaweng's busiest road runs parallel to the beach for about six kilometres. We walk from its centre almost three kilometres to one of its far ends. There is no footpath, as such. Sometimes there is concrete in front of a string of shops in a row that you can walk along. Sometimes there is only dirt, and sometimes the shopfront comes all the way out to the road. We are perpetually stepping on and off the road as we walk.

When we are on the road, we have to weave our way around food carts and parked vehicles. A steady stream of taxis, *song theows*, scooters and rented jeeps barrel down the road, sometimes directly towards us. Every ten seconds a taxi or *song theow* beeps to offer us a lift.

'They can't stand to see Westerners walk anywhere', Aidan jokes.

I love walking up and down this inconvenient road, even if Aidan and I can't walk side by side because it is too narrow in most places. I've walked its full length many, many times. I love the bright colours, the smiling faces, the noise, the messiness. The whole place seems thrown together. Back home, it's unlike me to like anything that is disorganised or haphazard.

A heavy shower that lasted only fifteen minutes is just tapering off. We aren't very wet, having only just left the small restaurant where we ate our dinner as the rain went from fat to thin, but Chaweng is soaked. The Happy Nights bar looks different when wet from the rain, neon ghosts reflecting off the tiny drops hanging from the tin roof. The bar is next door to a large, fancy restaurant set well back from the main street, a well-manicured tropical garden in front of it and tables and chairs

strategically placed throughout in order to afford privacy to the tourists who eat outside. Next to the restaurant, the bar seems tiny. The tin roof hangs off the shopfront like a verandah. There's a concrete floor and no walls. Inside, there are a few high, round tables with bar stools, the old pool table and a small bar in the corner at the front, nothing but a piece of cane furniture holding a few glasses and bottles of alcohol. At the back, the building's outer wall has been converted into a long bar and everything sits in the little shop behind it. Move the few things from the small front bar to behind the main bar and pull the roller shutter down over the shopfront and the bar is closed.

There are fewer customers tonight and the woman behind the back bar is sitting down, a stack of dirty glasses beside her, old Michael Jackson songs playing through a dented CD player.

Salisa is there braiding Mali's hair. She doesn't look surprised to see us. Aidan's coming in with me again, hair still stuck down flat by his hat. I'm not ready to go alone yet. Tomorrow I will be, I think.

'So do you work as a prostitute?' I blurt out, before I can stop myself, as soon as we're all sitting down together, my voice as light and friendly as I can make it.

'Yes', Salisa says. 'I thought you knew that. Mali and I are bargirls. We have been since we were both sixteen.'

'Now we're twenty-four', adds Mali.

'It's so strange', laughs Salisa. 'Even my little sister is older now than I was when I started this work.'

'Is your sister also ... does your sister also do this work?' I ask, before I think about what I'm saying.

Immediately Mali looks over at Salisa, worried.

Salisa's face goes blank, her eyes lowered. 'No', she says firmly. 'My sister works in Bangkok as a hotel receptionist. It's a very good job. She's not ever going to do my job. She is going to manage a hotel one day. She studies. At university.'

'I understand', I say quickly, and I think she sees it was an honest mistake rather than a rude assumption, because she lets out a tense breath and continues talking.

'I met Mali when I first started working in Bangkok.' After a few more moments, she doesn't seem uncomfortable at all as she speaks. I can feel Aidan sweating next to me, running a hand through his hair.

'We've been going with men for eight years', Salisa continues. 'It's a long time, longer than most bargirls. We're saving up so we can retire.' She goes on, describing the customer she had last night in extremely rich detail, and after a few minutes, I let Aidan excuse himself for a few hours to see a Muay Thai match. Both of us relax as soon as he's gone.

'I'd like to talk to you for a few hours', I say to Salisa. 'For my book.'

'Will you pay my bar fine?' Salisa smiles.

I laugh, flush some. 'Why not?' I say. 'I'll even buy you dinner. Mali, too, if she likes. But you have to sign my consent forms'.

This isn't the way I'm supposed to approach interview subjects and gain informed consent. It doesn't seem to matter over here.

'Dinner for a signature, and we get to be in a book', smiles Salisa. 'Plus the bar fine is paid. Deal.'

It takes a few minutes and one thousand baht to settle things. Soon we've left the bar and are in the garden of the restaurant next to Happy Nights. Mali takes her high heels off, folds her legs up under herself in her chair and smiles dreamily. Giant

orange and white goldfish swim through the pond next to our table and neither Salisa nor Mali look at the menu before ordering, as if customers bring them here often.

Today, I am their customer, and they begin to tell me their story.

## Chapter Three

Salisa's birthday is five months before the King's—he was turning seventy-five that year, 2002, and she had turned sixteen—but it was the King's birthday she always looked forward to, because every fifth of December when the King got older, no one in her village had to work. So at six-thirty in the morning, Salisa was still sitting outside her family's hut making them breakfast, her younger sister, Khwan, quietly watching her. Breakfast was something she would normally have finished an hour ago. At this time of the day, she should be at work already, making her employers Christian and Lek a breakfast that mixed her own Thai cooking with the Western foods they preferred—fried potatoes with curry spice, scrambled eggs with noodles, other abominations. Today she was home, and so she was the first to see the gigantic, shiny 4WD as it crept slowly into the village.

Despite the car being made for off-road driving, the driver sitting behind the darkened windows was steering like he was trying to keep small rocks from jumping up and scratching the paint job. Salisa read the English letters L-E-X-U-S off the side of the car as it slunk past her house and down the road to the middle of the village. She strained to see inside but she saw no one. She didn't need to. She knew it was Ma coming home for her annual visit to her parents.

Salisa had never met Ma but she had seen her come home every year to celebrate the King's birthday with the village. When Salisa was much younger, Ma would travel from Bangkok by bus to one of the nearby villages and walk from there. As Salisa had grown older, Ma's parents' house had become bigger and more lavish, and Ma herself had changed. Every year she came home, something about her was

better: she wore more gold on her fingers, the car she drove (and later was driven in) became classier, her clothes became more fashionable and more obviously expensive.

Salisa's mother and father joined her and Khwan outside at seven, having slept in two hours later than usual. Her brother was still nowhere to be seen, but he usually slept until at least mid-morning, even later if he had been out drinking the night before.

'Ma is home', Salisa said.

'That's wonderful', her mother said, which wasn't unusual. 'We have been invited to her parents' house for lunch.' But that was.

Salisa's mother and father picked up their rice bowls and ate the breakfast she had made for them, casting each other strange looks.

'Do I get to go?' asked Khwan.

'Not this time', said their mother.

None of her family had ever been inside Ma's parents' house before. There was nothing surprising about the way it looked to Salisa. In fact, it was quite similar to the house Christian had built for Lek on her family's land, the house where Salisa had been working for Christian and Lek as a maid for four years, since she was twelve. Salisa's parents, though, were overwhelmed by the beauty of the house, how modern it was. Salisa's mother kept brushing and rearranging her clothes as they were shown through the opulent rooms, but it didn't make her cotton shirt and fisherman's pants look any better. Her mother was embarrassing her. It was a special occasion, sure, but a modern house, even one in this tiny village, didn't seem so special to Salisa.



The lunch was more of a party. Six families and their children arrived. All of the children were girls, and all about Salisa's age. Salisa watched Ma stride around the room, greeting everyone and encouraging them to take the drinks that were offered by her parents' housekeeper.

Ma's black hair was dead straight and reached down past her waist. She wore multiple gold bracelets on both wrists. Around her neck she wore a thick gold chain that supported a very heavy-looking gold Buddha. Her clothes looked just like those that Salisa had seen in the fashion magazines at her cousin Dao's house in Chiang Mai.

At this time, before everything, Salisa thought Ma was the most beautiful and sophisticated woman she had ever seen. One by one, Ma invited each family to sit with her, privately, in the lounge room.

'What is she talking about with them?' she asked her mother.

Her mother said nothing, just ate, pretended not to have heard.

Salisa learnt what was happening from the daughter of the first family to emerge, faces still, from the lounge. Ma was hiring new staff for her business in Bangkok.

'And she wants to hire girls from this village?' asked Salisa. 'What will we be doing? We'll be learning how to run a business like her?'

'Probably', said the girl, rubbing her eyes. 'I won't be going.'

'Your parents don't seem upset', said Salisa.

'They're furious', said the girl. 'I'll get it later.'

Her eyes looked tired, miserable at the thought of missing out on the money that every girl in the village was looking for all the time. All of them needed money to support their families, far more money than jobs like Salisa's maid position with

Christian and Lek could provide. Salisa received a small raise in her wages every year, but they still only paid her five hundred baht a week.

Salisa hugged the girl close and let her sniffle a little bit into her shoulder. She was looking at Ma's refrigerator, its chrome panelling, how modern it looked. Thinking about how a girl might earn that for her family in Bangkok. How there would only be a few girls chosen today for that privilege. She hugged her friend tighter.

She wished her parents had prepared her for this. Why they hadn't told her what they were really doing there, she couldn't say. When it was her turn, she walked towards Ma with an uncertain smile, showing all her teeth. Her mother followed behind and brushed off Salisa's skirt and smoothed down her hair. Salisa flinched.

'Hello, Salisa', Ma greeted her in English as if they were old friends.

'Hello, *Khun* Ma. How do you do?' Salisa replied in the way Christian had taught her to greet people politely in English. She also gave Ma a deep *wai*.

Ma returned the *wai* to Salisa and to her parents. Salisa's parents couldn't speak English, so she expected Ma to return to speaking in Thai, but she didn't. 'You have grown into a beautiful young woman. And I hear you have been studying English?'

'Yes, I have been studying very hard for as long as I can remember. My mother always told me that English is the most important thing to learn now. She said it is the best way to get ahead and support your family.'

'So you do want to support your family?'

'Of course, it is my duty as the eldest daughter.' As Salisa said this, she glanced back at her mother. Her mother smiled instinctively.

Ma looked Salisa up and down as though inspecting a water buffalo before she bought it. Salisa, still standing, shifted from foot to foot and sat down quickly without being asked.

‘My business in Bangkok, a restaurant, is very successful and I need to hire new staff’, Ma said. ‘I could hire girls from Bangkok, but I am loyal to my village and wish to help other girls here to achieve the success that I have. I like what you say about your duty. Duty is very important to me.’

Salisa knew, well before the conversation ended, from the way Ma was looking at her, that she was going to be chosen. She could feel her mother beaming at her from behind. Somehow she wished her mother wouldn’t look so proud. She wished her mother would again reach down to brush off her shirt or straighten her hair, but apparently the deal was done now; nothing more needed brushing or straightening. The conversation lasted only a few minutes more before Ma offered Salisa a job as a waitress.

Her father had his hand on her shoulder, proud, as they walked out of Ma’s modern house. The other parents in the village were still fussing over their daughters in preparation for their turn with Ma. She held her head up as she walked by, let the girls and parents get a good look at her, one of the chosen ones, and let herself feel the family pride radiating into her through her father’s hand. It occurred to her that she would miss that feeling. Ma had told her to go home to pack. She and the other girls would be leaving for Bangkok in the morning.

She knew nothing about Bangkok, except it was busier and bigger than even Chiang Mai, a place Salisa had visited a few times a year growing up, when her mother went to see her sister’s family there. She knew nothing about being a waitress, except what Ma had told her: that it was just like the work she did for

Christian and Lek, and that she would have no trouble learning. Ma told all the girls they would be living with her and she promised their parents she would take care of them. Knowing nothing more than that, Salisa and the three other girls who were chosen went home to spend their last night with their families.

At six-thirty the next morning, the Lexus crept slowly along the dirt road again towards Salisa's house, where she was waiting. She was wearing her best dress and carrying a backpack Christian had given her, two used English textbooks, three sets of clothes and underwear, her toothbrush, and a tiny bottle of perfume she'd bought from the night market in Chiang Mai two years before and never used. Ma's window rolled down half way and she waved to Salisa's mother from the front passenger seat.

The driver left the car to take Salisa's backpack and handed her mother an envelope containing two thousand, five hundred baht, more money than she had ever seen at one time. 'A gift for the family', the driver said. Later, Salisa found out it had been half her first month's wages.

She hopped into the back seat alongside the three other girls from the village, their four scrawny frames fitting more or less comfortably into the expansive back seat. The other girls looked nervous and excited. Salisa wondered if she looked the same.

'Be good', said her mother, and the Lexus pulled away.

Salisa looked back as the car turned the corner out of the village. Khwan sat on the wooden steps of their hut, her dusty feet folded up underneath her, fat tears sliding down her cheeks. With her right hand, her mother was waving, with her left she was handing the envelope to her father.

On the long drive to Bangkok, they stopped at several 7-Elevens, where Ma bought each girl all the junk food she wanted. They sat in the back seat and munched, happier, they thought, than they'd ever been. While they drove, Ma told them glamorous stories of the city and her life there. She spoke to the girls at length about all her expensive possessions and the penthouse condo where she and her American husband lived. The girls smiled to each other and Salisa tried to imagine how it would feel to see these things after weeks of living in Ma's penthouse with her. How strange it would be, she thought, to think of these things as ordinary. She worried some about whether success would spoil her, and as the car hurtled along the road, about what it would be like to drive back to the village a few years later in a fancy car with a fancy driver, just like Ma had done.

After driving for nearly twelve hours, the girls were excited when the driver told them they were approaching Bangkok. From the highway, they started seeing the city's buildings. Buildings and more buildings—and cars. Millions and millions of cars.

'We're here', Ma announced, turning to them to smile wearily. 'This is Bangkok.'

Salisa could feel the shiver of excitement running across the back seat from the other girls' bodies, surprised to realise that she, too, was shivering, but the car didn't stop after it got off the highway and entered the busy streets. It just got slower. It kept crawling deeper and deeper into the city, and the girls looked at one another, confused, not understanding how big Bangkok was. No one wanted to ask Ma why they weren't stopping. It was another hour before they reached their destination.

‘This is Patpong’, Ma finally announced. Salisa had expected they would be pulling up outside a block of condos and going inside with Ma, who would show them to their lavish bedrooms and invite them to get a good night’s sleep. When she stepped out of the Lexus, Salisa found herself on a street that barely looked like a street at all to her: dozens of bars, restaurants and massage parlours, as far as the eye could see; the sky above jet black, starless, with a corona of brilliant pink neon floating above the storefronts, tracing out English-language words she’d never seen, but whose meaning she could guess from the way the light of the neon reflected off the skin of the hundreds of half-naked Thai women who stood in front of the doorways. She also saw more men who looked like Christian, but generally far older and fatter, than she had ever seen before, many as drunk as the men of the village at the end of long festival days. They crossed from one side of the street to the other between the maze of cars and bicycles, shouting at the women, who smiled and called, ‘Welcome!’ The air was sticky and stank of old peanut oil and meat from the food carts that punctuated the street.

Ma didn’t get out of the car. She rolled down her window and pointed at the bar directly in front of where the girls were standing. ‘Lusty Lotus’, read the sign above the door, complete with a sensuous flower traced in neon, a pair of shapely cartoon legs emerging from the petals.

‘That is my bar’, she announced. ‘Go inside and tell the girls that I have dropped you off. They will take care of you and I will see you later tonight’.

Salisa opened her mouth to ask one of the ten most immediate questions that came to mind, but she couldn’t get even one of them out before Ma’s window slid back up. The driver handed each of the girls their bags, jumped back in his seat, and the Lexus pulled back into traffic. Now that it was no longer rolling over the dirt and

gravel of the road in front of Salisa's house, the car moved smoothly, like some jungle animal, like a thing that belonged.

'She said we'd be working in a restaurant', said one of the girls. 'Not in a bar.'

'Maybe there's no difference', suggested Salisa.

The music in Ma's bar was so loud and there were so many flashing lights that Salisa couldn't really make sense of her surroundings. All she knew was the place was full of white men. Some of them were staring at her and she flushed and looked down. She'd never felt stares like that before.

Someone grabbed her arm, and she turned quickly. A tall Thai woman with platinum blonde hair was pulling Salisa and another of the girls from her village towards the back of the bar. Thinking of the men's stares just outside, Salisa happily followed the blonde and the other girls followed her.

Once the woman had all four of the new girls in the back room, she looked them up and down and rolled her eyes. 'You'll be staying upstairs', she said in English. The other three girls looked at one another; Salisa was the only one who could understand. She gestured to the stairs. 'She's showing us where we're staying', Salisa said. 'Come on.'

Upstairs was one long room lined with sleeping mats on both sides. Salisa counted ten down each side. Each mat had a little cupboard next to it and most had photos taped to the wall above. Some of the mats had girls sleeping on them. At the other end of the room was a small kitchenette and some chairs. A door led to what Salisa discovered later was a cramped, dirty communal bathroom. A few girls were busy down there, chatting away to each other as they cooked or ate. To the right of the stairs at the end of the room where the four girls stood was a long rack absolutely

stuffed with clothes and what seemed like millions of shoes on racks underneath. In the corner, chairs were lined up in front of mirrors on the wall and a few more girls were there, applying makeup. The reek of hair spray and *pad thai* filled up everything.

‘Here’, said the blonde woman. ‘Find a mat, dump your stuff, and get ready for work.’ She disappeared downstairs, leaving the girls alone.

‘What did she say?’ one of the girls asked Salisa. She sounded like she was about to cry.

Salisa translated what the woman had said, but the others still stared at her like they hadn’t understood. They just stood there. ‘I’m sure this isn’t where we’re going to live’, Salisa said. ‘This is probably just where we get ready for work and where we rest. Ma will take us to her house when she comes back, like she promised.’

Two of the girls smiled at this and Salisa smiled back. The girl who looked like she was going to cry seemed to calm down a little. Smiling at all three of them, Salisa took it upon herself to set an example. She went to the first mat that had no photos above it and nothing in the cupboard. She dropped to her knees and squeezed her backpack into the cupboard. The mats next to hers were both taken, so the other three girls walked down the line of mats until they found three more free.

Now they just had to get ready for work, but the blonde woman hadn’t explained this part at all. Salisa decided to copy what the other girls were doing. Obviously they were expected to change into clothes from the rack, since their clothes from the village, fisherman’s pants and light cotton shirts, were completely out of place. Even in their best clothes, they looked like farmers. Salisa walked



towards the rack with what she hoped looked like confidence (especially since the other three girls were still trailing her like stray dogs), and grabbed the first dress she saw. Once she had it, she wasn't sure what to do with it. It looked like no dress she'd ever seen, shiny blue and silky, and there didn't seem to be much material, and she wasn't sure how to put it on.

One of the girls sitting in front of the mirror, who looked to be about fourteen to Salisa, turned around and shook her head with a small smile. 'Those dresses are for the hostesses', she said. 'Are you a hostess or a waitress?' The girl stood up from the mirror and came to stand beside Salisa, facing the rack. Up close, she was surprisingly pretty, her skin paler than Salisa's and her eyes large and bright. What was more surprising, they seemed kind.

'Um, I'm a waitress?'

'Yes, that's right', the girl nodded. 'I was a waitress when I first came, too.' She took Salisa to the end of the rack and found a blue dress that looked like it would cover twice as much skin. 'This is what you can wear. My name is Mali. And we should probably be friends.'

'Why is that?' asked Salisa, smiling.

'Because you picked the mat next to mine,' Mali said, pointing. 'So we'll be seeing a lot of one another. If we're not friends, then how would I know you wouldn't try to strangle me in my sleep? I like to be on the safe side.'

Salisa laughed. 'I'm Salisa. So Mali, as my new friend, can you tell me one thing? Where do I change? Is there another room?'

'No, you just change here.' Mali smiled.

Turning around, Salisa saw three naked girls pulling on dresses from the other end of the rack. Embarrassed, she looked back at Mali.

Mali smiled her small smile again.

It was enough to reassure Salisa. At least one person here was being helpful. 'Is this what it's like in all the restaurants?' she asked, gesturing to the mats.

'In all the bars, you mean?' said Mali. 'No. Not many bargirls live above the bars. And if they do, they live in proper rooms, just two or three girls sharing each one, not one big room like this. Ma likes to have her girls here so she can keep a better eye on them. And collect their rent.'

Salisa giggled, even though what she was hearing wasn't really funny. She felt nervous. 'You sound like you've been here awhile', she said.

'I have', said Mali. 'I'm an *old pro*.' She used the English expression, making Salisa smile even more.

'How long?' Salisa asked.

'Six months.'

'Six months!' exclaimed Salisa. 'And you're already a—a hostess?'

'Sure', said Mali. 'You can move up quickly here, if you want to.'

Ma returned to the bar at eleven. Salisa was dressed and Mali had done her makeup for her. Mali was taking her and the three other girls downstairs when Ma intercepted them on the staircase. She motioned for them to go back upstairs, where she gave them what seemed like the briefest description possible of their job. At least she didn't say it in English, so Salisa didn't have to be stuck as translator again.

'You girls are all waitresses,' said Ma. 'This means you get paid five thousand baht per month, plus tips. But you must pay one thousand baht per month for your rent here. You must buy your own food. You should send half of your wage home to your family, at least. Your job is to deliver drinks and food from the bar to

the customers and to keep everything clean. No empty glasses on tables. Ever. You must be very friendly to all the customers and learn to speak English. When you are ready, if you want to go with customers, you can be a hostess. You will earn much more money as a hostess. Any questions?’ She said this in a way that clearly indicated she did not expect questions and quickly turned on her heel to go back down the stairs.

The girls followed her down.

‘I thought we would be living with you?’ Salisa asked, knowing none of the other girls would have the guts. She probably should have asked what going with customers meant, but their living arrangements were of more immediate concern.

‘You *are* living with me’, Ma said. ‘You’re living here in my bar. Don’t worry, I’m here all the time. If you have any questions or problems, talk to Lily first.’ She pointed to the tall blonde who had taken them upstairs, who was currently sitting on a man’s lap. Ma gave them a dismissive smile and hurried across the bar to a large group of loud men.

Clunking in the unfamiliar high heels Mali had insisted she wear instead of the sandals she was familiar with, Salisa worked delivering drinks to customers and clearing their glasses. When the bar closed, sometime between two and five in the morning, she spent another two hours cleaning with the other waitresses. Then she went upstairs and slept until late afternoon.

Every day she woke up and got ready with the other girls, chatting, trying to be friendly and to avoid any of the conflicts that the older girls seemed to have most of the time. She tried to balance things out between talking to the girls from her village and the older girls that Mali introduced her to, but she could already feel the

wall dividing them—none of the girls she'd come with knew English as well as she did, and none of them seemed to have taken to the work, gruelling as it was, the way Salisa had. None of them made the tips she made, even as clumsy as she still was in the heels. She was young and her English was excellent, and the customers rewarded her. One of the girls from her village was telling everyone within earshot how much she wanted to go back home. Salisa tried hard to avoid her. Ma, unpleasant as she had turned out to be, had made this place work for her. Salisa was determined to do the same.

It wasn't long before Salisa learnt more about what was happening. Mali was already a hostess and explained everything to her at length during her first week. They moved their mats close together when they went to bed and spoke in whispers before falling asleep.

Mali was paid eight thousand baht per month and didn't have to pay any rent. She kept her tips, like a waitress, but also earned commissions when her customers bought drinks. When Mali went with customers, the money she earned was hers to keep.

'When you say, "going with customers"', Salisa asked one night, 'what exactly does that mean? Like, you take them to restaurants?'

'They take me to restaurants', said Mali, 'and sometimes other places. And then I have sex with them.'

Salisa sat there in the darkness, listening to the hum of the air conditioning vents behind the walls pumping cold air into the bar downstairs, but not the room above.

'Are you surprised?' asked Mali. 'What did you think people pay so much money for?'

‘I don’t know’, said Salisa. ‘I didn’t think much about it.’

‘It’s a lot of money’, said Mali, ‘and it’s not as bad as you think. You get used to it after a while.’

‘How long a while?’

This time it was Mali who was silent in the dark room. ‘A while’, she said finally.

Mali explained more until their eyes started to droop. Salisa quickly became familiar with terms like ‘short time’ and ‘long time’, but it was a few months before she would begin to use them herself.

## Chapter Four

Today is so hot and sticky that I keep sweating sunscreen into my eyes, so instead of meeting Salisa and Mali at the cramped and uncooled room they rent above the massage parlour a few doors down from their bar, I take them out to a late lunch at the Three Monkeys bar and restaurant. We eat upstairs on the balcony, two ceiling fans working so hard above our heads it looks like they might fall on us. A little tired of trying so hard to fit in, I skip the Thai food and order hot chips (no salt) and a grilled, skinless chicken burger on a wholemeal bun, and laugh a little when Salisa screws up her nose at the smell when it arrives. We all drink banana shakes, mine without sugar, and Salisa and Mali eat like rabbits as usual, slowly nibbling on salads.

I watch them carefully, trying to imagine them eight years younger, at sixteen, working in a bar in Bangkok, Mali already a prostitute and Salisa right on the edge of entering that world. They always act so happy and carefree: big smiles, all jokes and giggles. Everything is '*mai pen rai*', never mind. Nothing seems to bother them. It doesn't feel like it matches up with the story they are telling me, but maybe it does. How else can a person live through these kinds of experiences and still come out okay on the other side?

'I hope *he* comes into our bar later', Mali says in a low voice, smiling widely.

Salisa looks over my shoulder at the man Mali is talking about and nods in agreement.

'Why?' I turn around, not inconspicuously, to see two young men in boardshorts and t-shirts they have obviously bought from one of the stalls in

Chaweng. I assume Mali is talking about the one who is looking right at us, a big grin on his face. At first glance, to me, he doesn't look much different, to me, than any other white, young tourist.

'He's got money', Salisa says, just as Mali says, 'He must be rich'. They don't wait for me to ask them how they know; they are becoming more used to my questions. 'To you, everyone might look the same when they are here on holiday. But they aren't the same. Look at his watch. It's real and it's expensive. Not the type you buy here. They are drinking the most expensive beer on the menu *and* they're eating steak. Most expensive food.' Mali stops talking to take a few more bites of her salad.

Salisa continues her friend's thoughts. 'They're staying at the most expensive resort on Chaweng beach as well.'

'How do you know?'

'The beach towel.' Under the table, a bright yellow and blue beach towel peeks out from one of their backpacks. 'It belongs to the resort.'

The expensive watch is one thing, but noticing the towel is amazing to me. 'So why did you say you hope just *that* guy comes into the bar, not both of them?' I ask. 'That stuff applies to them both.'

'He's better looking', they both say simultaneously, and they start laughing at each other.

'By the way, everyone doesn't look the same to me.' I try not to sound defensive. 'I am a researcher, after all. It's my job to observe things.'

'Okay, like what? Who would be the best customer for us in this room?'

Salisa finishes her banana shake, sucking loudly with her straw to get the last bit. I look around the restaurant for a second and pick someone. ‘The guy at the table by the stairs.’ I’m confident I’m right.

They both turn slightly and look without making it obvious, then they start giggling again. ‘You’re right! Why?’

I sit up straighter, trying to fit in again. ‘Well, he’s been here by himself the whole time, eating alone, so he probably doesn’t have a wife or girlfriend with him. Plus no wedding ring. He fits the profile—old, white, unattractive, alone—so he is probably planning on paying for company while he is here. And he can afford to pay well for it, too: gold watch, gold necklace. But most importantly: his car keys next to his drink. He’s hired a car for his stay, but it’s a BMW, not some cheap jeep’.

I thought my deductions were pretty simple, nothing very impressive, but Salisa and Mali coo over me anyway.

‘You would make an excellent bargirl’, Salisa announces.

I automatically open my mouth to protest, but shut it again half a second later when I realise she means it as a compliment.

‘Yes, you are very beautiful and smart. You would have many customers.’

Mali nods vigorously.

‘Um, thank you.’ I know they aren’t actually suggesting it as a career option. I shake my head slightly and quickly ask if I can come to the Happy Nights bar with them tonight and watch them work. They giggle again and say they think it’s a great idea.



Aidan meets me there after a busy day of lying on the beach. One of his shoulders is sunburnt. ‘You weren’t there to put the sunscreen on for me’, he grumbles.

I just smile and ignore him, my eyes firmly on Salisa, who is with a customer at a table across the small bar. I can hear everything they are saying. I’m only pretending to listen to Aidan, sipping on my sparkling mineral water and stabbing at the slice of lime with my straw. Salisa had the owner buy some bottles just to sell glasses of it to me. I’ve given the bar so many bar fines by now that I have the privilege of sitting around for hours not buying alcohol without feeling guilty. It occurs to me that there could be vodka in this sparkling water and Aidan wouldn’t know.

‘So, I knew you would be researching, of course, but I didn’t realise you would be spending so much time doing it. What is it with you and these women?’ Aidan is still complaining.

I strain to hear the customer, an old man, as he and Salisa talk, their voices lower now. I can’t hear much, so I turn my attention to Aidan for a few minutes while I wait for the old man to get louder again. ‘Yeah, I know I’m spending more time working than we thought’, I say. ‘But I didn’t realise I would find anyone so open and willing to tell me her whole life’s story. It’s so valuable for my research; her story is amazing.’

‘You think everything about Salisa is amazing. Do you have a crush on her or what?’ Aidan asked, half teasing.

‘No!’ I sound defensive again. ‘Well, yes. A friend crush. I want to be her friend. She’s just so...’ I look over at Salisa again and see her leaning in to the old man, like she is telling him a secret she has never told anyone. ‘Magnetic.’

Aidan drops it and we spend the next few hours talking and laughing while I watch Salisa and Mali work their magic all night, collecting drink commissions and tips from all sorts of men. Just after midnight, I can tell Salisa is closing the deal with someone and he pays her bar fine as he pays his tab.

She walks by me on her way out with a fake frown and says, 'I'm so sorry, but you can't observe this part!' Then she flashes a wide smile and disappears into the crowd of people walking past the bar as she heads off down the street with her customer.

## Chapter Five

In the first two months after leaving her village, Salisa had worked as hard as she could, but it became clear that she wasn't earning enough. She received letters from her mother and father asking where the rest of their money was. They were very disappointed that she was keeping her wages for herself, and not sending the expected amount home. Salisa told them she was only earning five thousand baht per month, but they didn't believe her. They had high expectations because they had seen how much money Ma had sent home from Bangkok over the years. Salisa was too embarrassed to explain the difference between a waitress and a hostess to her parents. She wondered if they already knew. Salisa was nearly seventeen now, old enough to be taking care of her family.

If she didn't earn more, her parents said, they wouldn't be able to keep Khwan in school much longer. Khwan was only ten, and already they were talking about the money she could earn, like Salisa, only maybe Khwan would do better at it than her older sister. Salisa stopped reading the letter, folded it up and stared at the ceiling of the upstairs room. She thought about Khwan lying here, staring at the same ceiling, in only a few years' time. She thought about Khwan changing her clothes in public with the other girls, and eating the cheapest food she could find, and the *farang* men laughing as she carried empty glasses away while they put their hands on the backs of her legs.

'*Khun* Ma?' Salisa knocked on the office door, which was half open. Ma always leaned to the left to see who was standing there before she invited them in.

Seeing Salisa, she smiled to herself and called for her to enter. 'I would like to ask your permission to become a hostess,' Salisa said. 'When I first arrived, you said that when I was ready, I could earn more money. I want to earn more money now.'

Ma sat at her desk and tapped her fingers together. Her office was the nicest room in the bar, with photos of beaches hanging on the walls and a jade paperweight Buddha on the desktop, weighing down invoices and purchase orders for bar supplies, and a cup of coffee with condensed milk cooling next to Ma's keyboard. 'Do you know what is involved?' Ma asked at last.

'Yes', said Salisa.

Ma raised her eyebrows. 'And you think you could do a good job?' she asked. 'I must not have any customers complaining about my girls. You must be able to keep customers happy.'

'Yes, I—' Salisa tried to speak louder in an attempt to feign confidence, but she still couldn't get a complete sentence out before being interrupted.

'Did you have a boyfriend in the village, Salisa?'

Here Salisa paused. She knew what Ma was really asking. If she told the truth, Ma might think that she was not experienced enough and worry that the customers would complain. But if she lied and Ma found out, that would be much worse. 'No, I didn't'.

Ma looked Salisa up and down again, as she had on the first day they met. 'Good,' she concluded her assessment. 'We can charge a lot of money for your first time. Your parents will be very happy; you can send them home a big gift.'

Salisa let her shoulders drop in relief. Her parents would be happy, finally, she thought. Khwan would be able to stay in school. Everything would be fine.

‘Go back upstairs and change’, said Ma. ‘Then come back down and Lily will help you tonight.’ Salisa turned to leave. ‘How long have you been here?’ Ma asked.

‘Two months’, Salisa said, still looking at the door.

‘You’re a very brave girl’, Ma said to her back. Salisa turned again, but Ma was already looking at her papers, sipping her coffee.

Lily took Salisa around somewhat begrudgingly and introduced her to all the regular customers in the bar that night. ‘You might have seen Salisa here before’, she said. ‘Before, she was a waitress. But now she will be going with customers for the first time. And she is a *virgin*. If you want her, please speak with *mamasan*.’

Salisa cast her eyes to the floor every time Lily announced she was a virgin. It was a very dirty floor.

By the end of the night, five men had put in a bid with *mamasan*—all the hostesses called Ma that, and Salisa started to get into the habit of it—for Salisa’s virginity. But *mamasan* made Lily parade Salisa around all week before she finally received a bid she was happy with.

It was a Friday night, one of the busiest of the week, when a man walked out of *mamasan*’s office and sat down at a table in the corner, then stared right at Salisa. Lily pointed him out to her. He looked like a businessman, or at least he wore a shirt and suit pants, unlike most of the *farang* who came to Patpong. His hair, once blonde, was starting to run to grey, and his mouth hung open a little bit as he sat, unsmiling, showing clean-enough teeth.

‘He has just paid for you,’ said Lily. ‘He won’t give you any money tonight. A tip maybe.’

Salisa looked at Lily with a blank face. Mali had already told her the story of her first time over and over, and Salisa thought she was comfortable enough with it, but somehow, now, seeing the man who would be her first, she felt a little like she were drowning. ‘What should I do?’ she asked Lily.

‘Just do whatever he says and smile’, Lily said over her shoulder, glad to be free of the job of showcasing Salisa. Now she could get back to focusing on her own customers.

He was German, and his English was not very good. His Thai, of course, was much worse. Salisa *waied* to him and gestured to the chair, asking if she could sit down. He smiled at her, his lips closing over his teeth, and ordered two drinks. Instead of bringing the normal lady drink for Salisa (which was always a soft drink), the waitress brought over two of what the German had ordered, bourbon and Coke. Salisa thought it was a mistake, but she saw that *mamasan* was watching her. She caught her eye and *mamasan* nodded. Okay, Salisa thought, this drink is going to help.

Salisa was drunk by the time the German took her by the arm and led her out of the bar. She had been speaking to him in both English and Thai for over an hour, hoping to make herself understood. He spoke back in German, using only a few English and Thai words in places. She thought he might have said his name, but she had no idea what it might be. She didn’t know anything really about this man who had bought her virginity. She drank three bourbons while they were talking. She had never had alcohol before, and had eaten only once that day.

He took her to the Sawan Hotel—*sawan* meaning ‘heaven’ in Thai—one of the nicest hotels close by, just down the neon street with its pink flashing naked women and the *farang* and vendors lining the footpaths. The brisk walk sobered her

up somewhat, but the fuzzy edges were still there. She thought she saw the receptionist looking sorry for her as the German directed Salisa towards the elevator.

She began to laugh as soon as the doors closed and the elevator started moving. The man looked at her and said something angrily that she didn't understand, and of course she couldn't explain to him what was funny. Mali, who had gone with a customer for the first time after only one week at the bar, was from a poor village in Isaan, and the first time she came to a hotel to have sex with a man was also the first time she had ever been in an elevator. She had been petrified when she was taken into what she thought was either a very small room or a very large cupboard, and then more so when it started moving. Salisa kept laughing, thinking of Mali, and finally the German tried to smile and laugh himself. This made Salisa stop laughing.

The room he took her to looked fancier and more luxurious than the nicest room in Christian and Lek's house, and that was the nicest place she had ever been so far. For the first time in her whole stay in Bangkok, she began to feel a little of the pride she'd felt when her parents had taken her to Ma's house—the knowledge that she was destined for better things than life in the village, and here they were, all around her. But first, there was this business to get through. She went straight into the bathroom and locked the door behind her. She knew she had to shower first, and she wanted some time alone to either think about what she was about to do, or to get ready to block it out. She wasn't sure which.

She couldn't hear any noise coming from the next room, so she assumed the German was just sitting there, waiting for her. She turned on the shower and sat down on the cold tile floor with her legs crossed and her back against the toilet, trying to slow her breathing. Again, she smiled to herself as she remembered Mali

telling her how confused she had been by the Western bathroom, the first one she had seen. Salisa was beginning to see what an advantage it had been for her, to have worked for Christian and Lek in their Western-style house and to have learnt English from Christian. Though her family was poor, they weren't as poor as Mali's family, and she at least wasn't shocked or scared by every single new thing she saw here in Bangkok. It must have been much worse for her friend, and she had come through fine.

Thinking of Mali the whole time, Salisa found enough courage to quickly shower and then exit the bathroom. The German was completely naked, lying on the bed and waiting for her. She looked back towards the bathroom and then at the man, expecting that he would shower first. After pausing there for a few moments, she realised that wasn't going to happen. Still fully clothed, she walked towards the bed and sat down next to him with a smile, trying hard to ignore the fact that he was obviously still quite sweaty from the heat outside, despite the air conditioner being turned up so high that she had goose bumps on her arms and legs.

This was the first time she had seen a grown man naked. She immediately disliked the thick hair on his chest and she tried not to look at anything else.

After a few more moments of not knowing what to do, Salisa moved from sitting to lying down on the bed. As soon as she did this, he lurched towards her and began trying to take her dress off. Salisa didn't know if she should just lie still and wait for him to get the dress off himself, or if she should do it. After a minute of his hands fumbling and failing to release any of the buttons, it was clear that as drunk as she was, he was drunker still, and she was going to have to do it herself. She made her lips into a smile for him and pulled away, getting up from the bed. Salisa quickly moved to turn off the many lights in the room before removing her dress. She could



feel his eyes on her as she made the room darker and darker. When she could no longer see him, she undid the buttons on her dress, but just as she let it fall to the floor, he turned the bedside lamp on. Embarrassed, she jumped into the bed and tried to get under the covers, but he pulled them back and left her there, crouching, naked. She took a deep breath and lay down, not moving. Now there was nothing left that she knew how to do herself.

Lying next to her, he took her hand and put it on his penis. With his hand still over hers, he guided her hand up and down. Mali had described what this was like, in detail, and so had the other girls at the bar, but the description didn't compare to the actual feeling—the heat, his strange alcoholic smell, his breathing. All of their instructions became meaningless as she felt his hand moving hers. His penis was already hard and he handed her a condom in a bright yellow packet. Lily had taken her aside that week and told her that she must always use a condom with customers, and had even showed her how to put one on a banana. Feeling slightly more comfortable—she knew what to do with this; she and Mali had practiced on bananas all week—she visualised the German's penis as a banana and rolled the condom over it. She was about to squeeze the air out of the tip, as she had practiced, when the German suddenly lunged forward and rolled on top of her, pushing her into the mattress with all his weight. Barely holding himself up with his left arm, he pushed her legs apart with his right hand—she felt the urge to resist and fought it, let him do it—and then guided his penis into her vagina. He didn't use any lubrication and from the pain Salisa felt she knew she certainly wasn't lubricated naturally. She lay still and tried to keep quiet as he pumped up and down on top of her. She felt like he was driving a knife in between her legs. Mali had told her it felt like being on fire inside. She bit her lip and tried desperately not to notice the pain.

Halfway through, she remembered that Lily had told her to make moaning sounds as if she were enjoying herself, that this would help the man to finish faster. She moaned once. The German paused for half a second—she burnt, the pressure of him inside her almost worse when he wasn't moving—and he looked at her quizzically. He hadn't been expecting her to feel any pleasure, she realised. She just kept quiet after that, and after a few more minutes, he let out a few loud moans of his own and rolled off her. The sharp pain stopped immediately, leaving a stinging feeling that was certainly preferable. Salisa gave the man a bright smile of relief, and he smiled back at her and said something in German. She no longer minded the way his lips hung open over his teeth, or the fact that she couldn't understand him. It was over, and she felt proud of herself for completing what she saw as her rite of passage. She had done what Mali had done, and like Mali, she had survived.

Mali had told her it would only hurt a few more times. Now she would be able to earn some real money.

## Chapter Six

Since Aidan can only stay for the first four weeks of my trip and will be leaving soon, and I don't want him to be too disappointed about the amount of time we've spent together, I devote an entire weekend to him. We do all the touristy things he wanted me to be there for: elephant riding, a visit to Big Buddha, shopping in Bophut, buying pirated DVDs, snorkelling and a private Thai boxing lesson with a Bangkok champion, ten times harder than my kickboxing lessons at home.

As a reward for my devotion, on Sunday night Aidan suggests that we eat dinner at the fancy restaurant next to the Happy Nights bar, so we can stop in to say hello to Salisa and Mali, and I can arrange to meet with them on Monday to hear the next part of their story.

While I prop my exhausted body up against the back bar to chat with Salisa, Aidan catches my eye. He inclines his head towards Nim, one of the other bargirls, near the front table. I give him an indifferent wave of consent, and he sits down with her and buys her a drink. Nim has a black eye and a long bruise across her cheek that are barely covered by her makeup. When she sits up in her chair and moves her arms from her lap to rest them on the table as she leans forward to talk to Aidan, I notice the bandage around her left forearm. I wince at the implications of it.

'So what happened to Nim?' I whisper to Salisa.

'What do you think?' she answers. 'She had a bad customer a few nights ago.' Salisa starts to sip at her water, as if there isn't anything else to say.

'But what happened, exactly?' I press.

‘The guy picked her up here and took her to a short-time hotel, one of the ones near the lake. He wanted her to ... do some things ... that she didn’t want to do. He got really angry because he said he had already paid for her, and he beat her. He left her on the floor, unconscious. The hotel staff found her when they came up to see why they hadn’t checked out of the room after an hour. They took her to the private hospital nearby. I had to pick her up and pay her bill. She’s back at work already because she wants to work to pay me back. You can’t even see the worst of it when she’s dressed.’

‘Oh.’ Now there isn’t anything else to say. I feel sick.

Nim is smiling and asking Aidan if he is a butterfly, a cheat, and then giggling when he tells her he isn’t. ‘You shouldn’t cheat on your wife’, Nim says, solemnly, loud enough for me to hear. ‘But I don’t know any men who don’t.’ Nim looks happy talking to Aidan—he is buying them drinks, so she’s working, but she knows she won’t have to go with him—so I hang back with Salisa for a while longer, just watching them. Staring at Nim, really. And then staring at Salisa. Then Mali. I wonder if they have ever been beaten.

After half an hour, Aidan gets up and walks over to us, looking like he hopes he isn’t interrupting anything. I announce to all that Aidan and I are leaving to have dinner, and I whisper to Aidan to give Nim a giant tip after he pays his bill. He mouths ‘Why?’ I give him a look that says ‘Just do it’. At his table, while he is being left alone to tip, I say, ‘Everything in your wallet. I mean it.’

‘So what was with the mammoth tip?’ Aidan asks when we are seated next door. I have been quiet, lost in my own thoughts, fears and guilt. ‘Do you think she needs a new scooter?’

‘Huh?’

‘After her accident.’

‘What accident?’

‘How do you think she hurt herself, silly?’ Aidan smiles at me, like he knows everything.

‘Nim didn’t fall off her scooter. She was beaten. By a customer.’ My voice is flat. My stomach feels like it is full of rocks.

Aidan stands up abruptly and looks over in the direction of Happy Nights. His face screws up in anger. But then he looks back at me, as if he is realising it is too late to do anything. He sits back down. ‘Someone did that to her?’ he asks, knowing the answer.

I tell him the story and we both feel sick. We order but we can’t eat our meals when they come.

‘This makes me feel really uncomfortable about what you’re researching, Lara. And worried about leaving you here when I go back to work.’

I blink at him, trying to decide the best way to respond. ‘What happened to Nim ... that’s why this research is so important. These things and worse are happening to women all over Thailand. All over South East Asia. All over the world, for that matter. You know.’ I try to keep any emotion out of my voice. The last thing I want is for Aidan to think that my passion about this will lead me to make bad decisions.

‘Yes, I *know*. And it’s not like I don’t think it’s important. You know I do. I’m not as active as you are, of course, in my ... I mean, I don’t really do anything, but I think it’s wrong. I’m against prostitution.’ His voice sounds hollow to me. I wonder if he is going to launch into another of his lengthy, defensive speeches about

how he really does care about these issues, even if he isn't doing anything about them. He goes on, 'But now, this. This isn't the same as you just researching it, reading about it in books. You are here, in it. With all these horrible men around you ... and maybe not really safe.' I get the feeling he doesn't feel he's made his point as well as he would have liked, but he stops talking.

The food lies on our plates, going cold. I stab at some chicken a little, moving it around. Aidan knows he isn't going to change my mind anyway, and I don't have the energy to go through the motions of arguing with him about this. I come up with a response that is definitive, not personal, and that I assume he'll have no answer to. 'Well, the university has hired me and it's my job to do this research. They approved it, they funded it. There are expectations and I have no choice but to meet them, or risk losing my job.' So he lets it go after that. He knows there is no chance I'll risk losing my job, not after sacrificing so much to get it. Working so hard. I look around the restaurant, suddenly remembering we're not at home. And that what I think of as sacrifice and hard work means just about nothing in comparison to what people mean when they talk about it here. In comparison to what Salisa and Mali have gone through. And Nim. And millions of women I haven't met.

When the time comes to pay our bill, we remember all our cash is gone and we have to pay on our credit card. We can't leave a tip for our waiter.

## Chapter Seven

In comparison to the paltry wages she earned as a waitress, Salisa found that the money she earned as a hostess was more than enough, even without her going with customers very often. Now that she was a hostess, or bargirl (which was the term used by everyone except *mamasan*), the half of her wages that she sent home every month was getting bigger and bigger. She often sent more than half.

‘I can’t believe I get paid this much just for talking and drinking with customers, and letting them feel me up a little bit in the bar’, Salisa whispered to Mali early one morning after most of the girls had already gone to sleep. ‘It’s so much more than I earned before as a waitress, and the work is easier.’

‘I know,’ Mali agreed, turning over to face her friend, who was lying on the mat opposite her.

Mali had already been working in the bar for six months before Salisa had arrived. So far, she had been focusing her energy on doing the best job possible without being asked to go with many customers, and without drawing any attention to herself. With over twenty girls working in the bar, it was easy to fly under the radar, for a while.

‘But what about when you do go with customers? That’s the worst bit.’ Salisa screwed up her nose thinking about it.

‘I’ve gotten used to it’, said Mali. ‘You’ll get used to it too.’

‘I don’t care if I get used to it’, said Salisa. ‘I could get used to anything. I could get used to brushing my teeth with vomit every morning. It wouldn’t make it any less bad.’

‘Gross!’

The girls giggled in the darkness while the women around them groaned and shifted on their mats. Then it got quiet again and Salisa watched Mali’s silhouette across the floor. ‘You still think it’s bad, don’t you?’ Salisa asked.

‘Maybe’, Mali allowed. ‘But I used to hate it a lot more.’

‘How much more?’ asked Salisa. ‘Do you think you hated it then as much as I hate it now?’

‘Maybe I hated it more, then’, Mali said. ‘I thought of all these tricks.’

‘Tricks?’ Salisa smiled. ‘What do you mean, tricks?’

‘Just tricks’, Mali said. ‘Stupid things. Little things to make it easier.’

‘Tell me some’, Salisa asked, and she kept badgering Mali, poking her side in the dark, until Mali gave in and pushed her mat closer until it was touching Salisa’s. She leaned over and whispered in her ear. Salisa listened, then sat back and stared at Mali’s huge eyes glittering in the dark. ‘That’s genius,’ she said.

‘You’re just being nice’, laughed Mali.

‘We have to try that’, said Salisa, and Mali froze.

‘We can’t try’, replied Mali. ‘Salisa, we’d get in so much trouble.’

‘No one’s even going to notice’, Salisa said. ‘Trust me. And tell me more of your tricks.’

‘No!’ Mali turned over on her side, and Salisa smiled to herself and sat in place, waiting for Mali to inevitably turn back to her and whisper more of her secrets.

Salisa looked around the bar as it started to fill up with customers. She was looking for new faces. In a place as busy as Patpong, in a bar as big as theirs, there



were always new customers. Customers that were new to the Lusty Lotus were good, but those who were new to Thailand were even better.

Two grinning men, fairly young, entered the bar hesitantly. They might as well have been holding up a map and carrying cameras around their necks. Breathing in quickly, Salisa stood up straighter and marched over to them before another girl got there first. Mali, terrified about what they were planning to do, stayed back by the bar and kept her eyes on Salisa as she crossed the room, hair swinging against her back.

‘Hi boys!’ Salisa greeted the men with a friendly smile and a *wai*, and then gestured for them to sit down at a nearby table. ‘Welcome to Lotus. Would you like some company?’ Salisa’s first move was always to demonstrate that her English was practically fluent, and far superior to that of most bargirls. This was normally a relief to newcomers, who had quickly tired of trying to make themselves understood, and who had never made any effort to learn any Thai themselves. The men looked relieved, just as she’d expected, and sat down at the table, smiling to each other.

‘Yes, please join us’, one of the men said, with an accent that Salisa immediately recognised as Christian’s.

‘You’re Australian!’ she announced. ‘I bet you are so sick of hearing everyone on the street say “G’day, mate” to you.’ Christian was always complaining about this and Salisa had found that this line always worked.

‘Yes!’ they cried in unison. ‘Not many people in Australia really say that anymore. Not young people, anyway.’

She kept working them, making sure to call Mali over as soon as it was convenient to do so. Mali walked over, still terrified, but following Salisa’s lead. Her job was to sit and look pretty, while Salisa’s job was to be intelligent, as culturally

knowledgeable as possible, and to ‘explain’ to the men everything they didn’t know about bargirls while they ordered drink after drink for themselves and for the girls, confident that at the end of the night they would be taking them home.

It took only an hour or two of the men talking to Salisa (and to Mali, through the stilted English she’d picked up so far and through Salisa’s services as eager translator) for Salisa to feel confident enough to move ahead with their plan.

‘This must be the life for you two girls’, one of the Australians was saying. ‘Just get to sit in a bar all day, looking pretty, talking to nice men like us.’

His companion chuckled at this, and Salisa laughed even louder. ‘You are so right!’ she gushed. ‘But it can be hard sometimes, too. For example, Mali hasn’t had a night off in thirty days. She almost never gets to see her daughter.’

‘Her daughter?’ the Australian said, suddenly not laughing. The men looked from Salisa to Mali, and back again. Mali, at age seventeen, could still pass for fourteen.

Salisa held her breath, a trick to make herself seem to turn pale—she had learnt it when teasing Khwan as children. ‘Oh no, please *forget* I said that!’ she said, making her voice tremble. ‘We are forbidden to tell any of our customers about our children. It makes us less desirable, you know.’

‘*Children?*’ asked the Australian, turning pale himself.

Salisa looked over her shoulder in feigned fear. Mali, helpfully, had been looking over her shoulder in terror of Ma overhearing them anyway. ‘Yes, we were both forced to have unprotected sex with many men when we first arrived here’, said Salisa, leaning in close and whispering. ‘And soon we were both pregnant. We were put out on the street to fend for ourselves until we had our babies. Afterwards, we were allowed back to work, and we must work *so* hard to feed our children. We don’t

have a choice.’ This was actually a true story that Salisa had heard about several bargirls from a bar down the street. Lily had confirmed that it wasn’t uncommon.

Part of Mali’s evil genius, Salisa knew, was that most men who entered the bar thought of themselves as good men. Most *farang* did not want to think that the women they were paying to have sex with didn’t have a choice. These Australians, Salisa noticed, were typical *farang* in this respect.

‘Look’, said one. ‘Um. Will they let you take a night off to see your children soon?’

‘It all depends’, said Salisa. ‘We may have to sleep with many, many more men before we have a night off. It all depends on the men, and what they want to do. We’re totally in their power.’ She looked longingly at the two Australians. Mali sat biting her lip.

‘Let me talk with my friend a moment,’ said one of the Australians, a sudden resolution appearing in his jaw. The two *farang* went off by themselves to talk.

‘We’re ruined’, said Mali in Thai. ‘They’re going to tell Ma or call the police.’

‘No’, said Salisa. ‘They’re going to do exactly what you told me they’d do.’

Sure enough, the two men paid the girls’ bar tab, took them out of the Lusty Lotus, and told them once they were on the street that they were free to visit their children for the night. They even gave Salisa an exorbitant tip and offered to walk the two of them to the bus stop, ‘just in case anything happened’ to them. Salisa and Mali declined, thanked the men profusely and walked down the street, the two Australians looking after them nobly. As soon as they turned the corner, they both burst into laughter.

‘I can’t believe it’, laughed Mali. ‘It worked, it completely worked!’

‘You knew it would work’, giggled Salisa.

‘I can’t believe they even wanted to walk us to the bus stop,’ Mali laughed.

‘Of course they did’, said Salisa, voice serious. ‘There are lots of wicked *farang* around. Some of them even go to bars to try to sleep with innocent Thai girls for money.’ She stared at Mali, straight faced, until the two of them couldn’t contain it anymore and again burst out laughing.

They did it again and again, with much the same results each time.

Sometimes men even took them to dinner after they paid the bar fine, and even the ones who didn’t want to get involved would at least leave them a massive tip for what was only a few hours’ conversation. ‘Never underestimate the generosity of good *farang* men’, they laughed when they were the only two girls awake in the upstairs bedroom, as happened more often than not.

They didn’t play tricks like this too often. Just often enough. They were careful to still go with enough customers each week, perhaps two or three, to keep *mamasan* happy. When they did go with customers, they had other ways of avoiding the sex they didn’t want to have. On the nights when they had to go with a customer, to keep up their weekly average, Salisa and Mali looked for men who were very young, very old or very drunk.

Hank, an American, was very young. He was in Thailand with four of his rich frat brothers for spring break. Salisa decided he was a virgin as soon as she saw him. If not, he might as well have been. While his friends stared rudely and groped every girl who walked past, Hank looked at the ceiling, or the floor, or intently into the girls’ eyes, all to stop himself from looking down at their chests. They had been in

the bar for about five minutes and Hank's friends had all grabbed girls they were interested in and pulled them onto their laps.

Salisa, telling herself to act like Mali, walked up hesitantly to the young man and offered him her hand to shake. 'Good evening, I'm pleased to meet you', she said to the floor. Her next move was to look upwards slightly and give him a half smile that he could only just see. 'My name is Salisa.'

'I'm Hank', he said, letting out a breath he had obviously been holding. 'You speak English?'

'Yes, I do. I'm studying it at university as part of my business degree.'

'Really?' He was obviously surprised and looked impressed. 'I'm studying law. Have you, um, worked here a long time?'

'No, this is just my first week. I'm not sure if I will stay—I'm so shy. I just really need the money for my studies.' Salisa looked into his eyes as she gave her last line, and knew that she had him.

When all his friends paid the bar fines for the girls they had picked up, Hank offered to pay Salisa's bar fine. She could tell he was doing so not just so he wouldn't be left out. He seemed to really like her. Hank said he couldn't take Salisa back to his room because the five of them were all sharing two interconnected rooms. Salisa wondered if the other four boys had taken their four partners for the evening back to the same room.

Salisa offered to take Hank to Preston Place, a cheap two-star hotel at the end of the road that the bargirls on that street in Patpong often used for short times. 'Or we could go to the Royal Iris Hotel', she said. 'It's a five-star hotel, and it's only a short *tuk-tuk* ride away. Or so I'm told. I've never been to either', Salisa mumbled. 'I've never, um—I've never been with a customer before this.'

‘Let’s go to the nice one’, Hank said, delighting Salisa, who’d grown sick of Preston Place, and who’d wanted to go to the Royal Iris ever since Lily had bragged about how nice a time she’d had there last week.

In the back of the *tuk-tuk*, Salisa discreetly began her task of arousing Hank. Underneath her oversized handbag, which was placed across both their laps, she ran her hand up and down over Hank’s crotch until she could feel he was hard. She had practised doing this while still looking timid. She had to project the right balance between being shy and inexperienced, yet liking this boy so much she couldn’t control herself. One way to do this was to stop what she was doing and to giggle a lot, then start again. This only served to heighten his enthusiasm.

Hank booked a deluxe room, the cheapest kind available, for the night. The receptionist asked him if he had any luggage and he became extremely embarrassed, and Salisa felt a moment of tenderness towards him, knowing that the receptionist knew exactly what Salisa was and what the two of them had come there for. In the elevator on the way up to the room, she let the strap of her dress fall off her shoulder and revealed just enough of her breast to excite Hank further. The elevator was slow, so there was enough time to take Hank’s hand and shyly place it on her breast so he could fondle her. This was basically nothing compared to what many of the men in the bar expected from her at this point in the night, but Hank’s hands were shaking, and it took him three tries to get his security card into the slot on the door to the room.

Once inside what was certainly the most luxurious hotel room Salisa had seen so far, she directed Hank towards the bathroom, where she suggested that they shower together. This was the easiest part. She turned away while she undressed, and asked Hank to do the same. She stepped into the shower and turned it on. When

Hank turned back, he saw the stunning image of Salisa, completely naked and wet. She lathered herself up with the complimentary lavender shampoo, and lathered Hank up as well. She grasped his penis shyly with a handful of suds and his face grew dreamy, delighted. Then she pumped his penis hard about four times and he orgasmed. She was infinitely pleased with herself, but managed to put on her most disappointed and embarrassed expression.

‘I have done something wrong!’ she accused herself, as Hank’s blood left his penis and went to his cheeks.

‘No, no, it’s fine’, Hank said. ‘It’s my fault.’

‘I will get in so much trouble with the *mamasan*’, Salisa continued. ‘You paid my bar fine! I have to have sex with you!’

‘No, no, you don’t!’ Hank replied instinctively. They both raced each other to dry and dress themselves, Salisa apologising profusely.

‘I’m so very, very sorry’, she said, her clothes finally back on. ‘I must leave immediately. I am so embarrassed. I’m so sorry for wasting your time.’ She wanted to get out the door before he realised that he could ask her to stay and try again later, if he wanted.

‘It’s fine, it’s fine’, he said. ‘But oh, before you go, let me pay you—’ He hurriedly reached into his wallet and pulled out three one thousand baht notes. Salisa made herself flush red as she quickly accepted what was almost three times the normal fee for a short time, apologised again, and left.

Thomas, an English man, was very old. He looked like an ex-pat rather than a tourist—his face was deeply tanned and his clothes, far from being flashy and tropical like so many tourists tended to go for, were faded and ancient. According to

Mali, he was not the right kind of customer. But from a table halfway across the bar, Salisa noticed him trying to pay for his drink when he ordered it. He seemed confused when the waitress waved away his money and explained to him, half in English and half in Thai, that he should pay at the end. Salisa raised her eyebrows at Mali, who wasn't with anyone yet, and pointed her nose at the old man. Mali nodded in return and went over to him quickly, before another girl got there first.

Mali *wai*ed to him as she approached, and he returned the gesture. She then held out her hand for him to shake, something else she had picked up from Salisa. 'Hello, where you come from?' Mali asked sweetly, acutely aware that her English was very basic in comparison to Salisa's. But then, there weren't many other people in the bar who spoke English as well as Salisa. Just Ma and Lily.

'I'm from London, England. My name is Thomas.'

'My name is Mali', she said. 'It means "little flower".' Salisa always liked how Mali said this when she met new people, trying to seem sweet. She even said it to waiters when the two of them went out for green curry together, spending money they'd earned from customers using one of Mali's plans.

'How lovely', said Thomas.

'How long you stay in Thailand?'

'Only two weeks, I'm afraid. But I am thinking about moving here to better enjoy my retirement.'

'Is this your first time in Thailand?'

'Yes, it is. You have a beautiful country.'

'*Korb khun ka*. Thank you.' One of Mali's great skills, and one that Salisa often envied, was her ability to never seem bored while having virtually the same conversation that she had a thousand times a night in thousands of bars across



Thailand. The questions asked of the customer are invariably the same. The answers vary within a set range of responses, like multiple choice. Sometimes Mali and Salisa would act out a typical boring conversation, one of them playing the customer with an exaggerated, ridiculous *farang* accent, until one or the other of them couldn't hold it in anymore and cracked up laughing. But once the template section of the conversation was over, Mali always began to falter, not fully understanding what was being said to her in English and being limited in her ability to respond. What she lacked in conversational skills she more than made up for with her sweet schoolgirl looks and her coy facial expressions.

When Thomas began to talk more specifically about his life and his opinions about her country—no doubt patronising and bizarre, Mali was sure, without even really listening to them—Mali put her hand on his arm and stroked it softly up and down while staring at him intently, as if genuinely interested in everything he had to say, whether she could understand it or not. She told him she was thirsty so he could order her a drink and make her smile, and then she told him she was hungry and he paid her bar fine so he could take her out to a nice restaurant for dinner. Then she told him she was tired, and he let her go home to sleep, a fat tip in her purse.

Salisa and Mali were aware that the more experienced girls in the bar all chose their customers differently. They looked for big spenders and repeat customers, always looking to maximise the amount of money they earned. But Salisa and Mali were looking only to maximise the amount of money they earned while having the least amount of sex. For Salisa's first two months as a bargirl, she and Mali usually picked the customers that the other girls weren't that interested in. This

meant they got on fairly well with everyone; they were never in the centre of any conflicts.

If a customer was young or perhaps a virgin, Salisa and Mali would always try to get him. It meant they could bring him to climax quickly in order to shorten sex or even avoid it completely. If a customer was very old and perhaps very lonely, Salisa and Mali aimed not to even have to go to a hotel room. If you picked the right ones, these elderly men would take you out for dinner and then accept your story about being sick or having some other reason to go home.

Very, very drunk was possibly the best. If a customer was very, very drunk, it didn't matter whether they were new to the bar scene or not. They could be completely familiar with what to expect and know how to avoid giving away money for nothing, but if they were practically paralytic, the bargirl they were with had the upper hand. Salisa and Mali would scope out heavy drinkers who didn't hold their liquor well and get their attention before anyone else.

There was a German who was very drunk once. Salisa couldn't remember his name, because she couldn't pronounce it when he told it to her. She called him 'honey' instead. He didn't notice that, or much at all, really. He was drunk before he even came into the Lotus at seven, just after they opened.

Salisa couldn't recall the conversation she had with him either. He spoke half in English and half in German, and didn't seem aware of which was which or that he was switching between the two, often mid-sentence. He had come into the bar with two drunk friends, but they left shortly afterwards, saying something about going to look for the fourth member of their group. At only ten, he paid Salisa's bar fine and offered, in slurry English, to take her back to his hotel. Once in the *tuk-tuk*, he couldn't remember where he was staying.

‘*Scheisse*’, he said. ‘Here, take my wallet. If I can’t even remember where I’m staying, I’m not going to remember my wallet later.’

‘That is very smart’, Salisa said, taking Honey’s wallet.

‘Look in there’, he said. ‘See’f you can find my key card.’

She found no key card, but there was a large wad of new thousand baht notes and three shiny plastic credit cards. ‘It looks like you don’t have a hotel’, she said. ‘I can suggest a good one to you. It’s the Royal Iris Hotel, just a few, ten, blocks from here.’

‘The what hotel? Iris? S’it expensive?’ slurred Honey.

‘Of course not’, said Salisa. ‘It’s the most economical hotel in Patpong. I recommend it to all my favourite clients.’

‘S’there a bar in the lobby?’ Honey asked. ‘S’it open?’

‘It brings me so much joy to hear you ask that’, said Salisa. ‘Of course there’s a bar. It is one of the best in Patpong. Maybe all of Bangkok. I recommend it to all my favourite clients.’

Thankfully, he had forgotten about the bar by the time they reached the hotel, because he was in a frightfully embarrassing state. Salisa thought that all drunk *farang* adopted the same personality: loud, boorish, arrogant, forgetful and decidedly unintelligent. They weren’t nice to be seen in public with.

The receptionist couldn’t understand Honey’s slurs, so Salisa translated for him, explaining that he wanted the most expensive executive suite. She handed over one of the credit cards in his wallet and let him make a squiggle on the receipt that the receptionist accepted as his signature. She squeezed Honey’s wallet back into the pocket in the front of his pants, contents intact, having counted the money that she might be able to convince him to give her by the end of the night. (It would have

been very easy to just take it. But in all her time working as a bargirl, Salisa never once did that.) Upon entry into the executive suite, Honey opened a tiny bottle of scotch from the mini bar, threw it down his throat like medicine, and collapsed on the bed. Salisa laughed, helped herself to some cashews, and took his clothes off as he began to snore loud enough to shake the windows.

She took a long, hot shower in the gorgeous bathroom, ran her hands over the shiny black tiles as she showered, and she laughed, the same as she did every time she saw it, at the phone on the wall next to the toilet. She used the blow dryer to dry her hair without worrying for a second that it would wake Honey from his drunken coma. Still naked and smelling of fancy soap, she snuggled into the quilt on the soft, Western-style mattress (which she still disliked) and slept a deep, restful sleep. Her father used to snore and her family all slept on mats next to each other in their one-room hut growing up, so Honey's snoring was comforting rather than annoying.

Exhausted, she slept in as late as Honey did, even though she had gone to sleep the night before at least six hours earlier than normal. When he turned over and squinted into the light, trying to recognise his surroundings and the naked woman next to him, Salisa gave him a huge, delighted smile and kissed him on the mouth, ignoring his poisonous alcoholic breath.

'You were *amazing* last night', she said in her best sexy voice. 'And I'm so glad you suggested that we stay here at the Royal Iris. You were right, I love it here.'

He didn't even seem confused. He was obviously an expert at waking up after binge drinking and accepting whatever confronted him. He just kissed Salisa back, enjoyed a large room service breakfast with her, and paid her the usual three thousand baht fee for the whole night and tipped her one thousand baht. Salisa

thought that he did so in gratitude for finding her, and all his money, still there in the morning. It was Salisa's best night that month.

'Top that', she bragged to Mali on their mats that night.

'Some people are so arrogant', Mali sighed, demurely, and turned away on her side, and Salisa laughed at her. Soon Mali was laughing, too, the two of them awake in the dark upstairs room with the other girls sleeping around them.

## Chapter Eight

Aidan and I have been fighting more since that night we found out what happened to Nim. It turns out our conversation hasn't appeased him at all; only made him feel worse. That night made me more determined to complete my research, to tell everyone in the world about what is happening here, and the role men from our own country are playing in it. I want to do something to stop it, but I don't know what I can do. All I know is how to research and write, so that's what I'm doing.

But Aidan wants me to stop. 'It's too dangerous', he keeps telling me. 'How can you not understand how dangerous this is? Especially after what happened to Nim.'

'I want to do this *because* of what happened to Nim', I explain to him once again.

'I'm going home soon', he says. 'I want you to come with me. I don't want to leave you alone in a place where ... where things like this happen.'

'Yes, Aidan', I say. 'I've certainly noticed that you don't like the idea of leaving me alone.' He has been making a nuisance of himself by coming with me every time I meet with Salisa and Mali. Hearing more of their story is only making him more frightened and more determined to convince me to come home with him instead of staying on my own.

'You're not sensible sometimes, Lara', he says. 'Going to these dangerous places. Have you thought about it? This person who ... who did this to Nim—he was a customer, in that same bar. You could have been sitting next to him, the night it happened, talking to Salisa and Mali—'

‘I could have been’, I say to him. ‘That’s true. And maybe I’m not sensible sometimes, because I care so much about this. But I know how to take care of myself. Do you really think I don’t know how to take care of myself?’

He sits beside me on the lounge chair in the balcony and we listen to the lizards talking to each other in the dark, their strange croaky conversation. I wonder if these lizards mate for life, and how many reptile husbands and wives are out there talking to one another right now, just like us. I wonder if he’s thinking the same thing.

He looks over at me, as if remembering who I am, and that I’m not going to do what he wants just because he wants it. That I am a person who knows what she is doing, and he can’t stop me from doing it.

‘Just please be safe. Be careful. Kickboxing lessons can’t protect you from everything, you know.’

I sit beside him and look at him, how his face looks when he doesn’t understand me, and I think, *Lucky me, I’m a white woman from Australia, and I don’t have to do what men tell me, not even my husband. Even if he does get grumpy when I don’t.*

I take a minibus with him to the airport. I love the Samui airport. It isn’t a normal airport. It is owned by just one airline, and they are the only ones who can fly in and out. They charge a lot for their flights, but the airport is worth it. It looks exactly like a five-star resort. There is even a long street of fancy boutiques outside the terminal, which is all open air, surrounded by luscious tropical gardens. There is a giant fish tank in the toilets. There is free food and drink, and comfortable couches in the lounge in front of the gates. I don’t go that far, this time. We stand in front of

the check-in counters together. The air is sticky, but Aidan is wearing tracksuit pants, ready for the overnight flight from Singapore to Adelaide, which is always chilly.

‘The airport reminds me of our honeymoon.’ Aidan smiles. ‘Remember how excited we were when we first touched down, and saw this incredible airport, the first time we came to Thailand?’

I smile and reach up to ruffle his sweaty hair. ‘I remember.’ It was only three years ago, but feels like ten. I was right in the middle of my four-year PhD in gender studies. (A brave time for Aidan to want to marry me, I thought.) My thesis was on the experience of Asian women immigrants in Australia and the discrimination they suffer. It took two years to finish it before I could become a lecturer and start on this research project. I had first thought of the general topic while on our honeymoon because of an old paperback I found in Lamai, *Sex Slaves*, on brothels and trafficking in Thailand. My initial idea had been to study the same topic. Walking around Samui on our honeymoon, I had been so naïve I didn’t realise that I was seeing prostitution everywhere I went. I didn’t find out what a bargirl was until our second trip the following year, and it was then I realised what I really needed to be studying: the prostitution that is in plain sight, that is so rampant it’s a crucial part of the tourism industry that my own country plays such a large part in.

Aidan has noticed that I’m being quiet. He probably thinks I’m upset. ‘I just love you, you know. I really love you. I’ve only been such a pain in the ass because I *worry* about you.’ He doesn’t want to leave on bad terms. He wants to feel close to me before he flies thousands of kilometres away.

‘I know, but you don’t have to. Worry, I mean. You should definitely keep loving me, even though I’m a non-traditional wife who goes gallivanting around



South East Asian countries researching the abuse of women instead of staying home and cooking you dinner!’

‘You don’t ever cook dinner. I never thought you *would* cook for me. But I admit, I didn’t really expect this, either.’ I begin to screw up my face at him in protest, but he goes on. ‘It’s okay, though. I understand why you are doing this. I don’t like it, but I understand. I support you.’

I unscrew my face and kiss him quickly for pretending to understand me. Especially since I’m not sure if I fully understand this about myself.

## Chapter Nine

It took two months for Salisa and Mali's luck to run out, but when it did, it ran out fast. It ran out so fast that neither girl thought anything of it when Lily told them that Ma wanted to see them in the afternoon, well before the bar opened.

'Girls. I don't think you appreciate the seriousness of this situation', Ma said to Salisa and Mali as she closed the door firmly behind them. She sat behind her desk, moving a stack of papers out of her way, and wiped some dust from the Chinese paperweight. There were two plastic chairs in front of the desk and the girls sat down in them without being asked.

'What have we done, *Khun* Ma?' asked Salisa. Mali just sat there, paler than normal.

'You haven't been here as long as some of my other girls', Ma said. 'So I am going to simply assume that you have not yet learnt the right way to do things and how to keep our customers happy. I am sure that you are not deliberately trying to trick any of our customers out of their money. To do so would be very foolish. Above all, I must protect my business.'

'We haven't done anything wrong', said Salisa. 'If the customers are happy with paying our bar fines and not having sex with us, then where's the harm in that?'

'And if the customers are unhappy?' Ma asked. 'What if one of my girls tells her customer that she's a virgin and has only been working two nights, but he distinctly remembers one of his friends going home with her a month before? Or maybe one of my girls tells another customer that she had sex with him, when all she did was get him so drunk that she thinks he won't remember her going to sleep untouched? But perhaps that customer did remember what happened, and complained to me? Think of how that makes me look, girls!'

Salisa sat there, biting her lip. She still remembered the car ride up to Bangkok, Ma describing all the beautiful things in her apartment, telling the girls how nice it would be when they were all living together.

‘I’m sorry, *mamasan*’, Mali whimpered, and Salisa stared at her. Mali was actually crying.

‘Thank you, Mali’, Ma said, and she looked at Salisa. ‘Salisa, are you sorry?’

‘Of course’, Salisa said levelly.

Ma looked at her, and Salisa looked back, trying as hard as she could to keep her eyes respectfully lowered. Finally, Ma sighed. ‘I must protect my business at all costs’, she repeated. ‘We come from the same place, Salisa. You know the money I send home to my family. You know how respected that money makes them in our village. Where do you think that money comes from, Salisa? Where do you think it will come from, if I can no longer trust my girls, if my girls make my business suffer?’

Salisa kept looking at Ma’s chin as she spoke, hearing Mali sobbing next to her. She thought of Ma’s house, of the way her parents had reacted, walking through it on the day of her interview.

‘I have an obligation to my family, Salisa’, Ma said. ‘So do you. If you jeopardise my obligation to my family, I’m not going to have a choice but to send you back to yours.’

Salisa thought of her parents waving goodbye to her as the Lexus took her down the road to Bangkok, and to Patpong. Her father putting the envelope containing half of her first month’s wages in his pocket. What that envelope could buy them. Her sister, Khwan, sitting in the schoolroom wearing the uniform and reading the books that Salisa’s tips and commissions paid for.

Her parents had worked very hard for their daughters when they were younger. She had worked hard, too, for Khwan and for her parents, ever since she started working as a maid for Christian and Lek when she was twelve years old. No

matter how far short of her dreams her life in Bangkok fell—and no matter what lies Ma may have told about it before she had come—nothing changed the fact that while she was here, she could do far more for her family than she ever could in the village. She had a duty, and she had an opportunity here. Nothing changed the fact that she was Salisa, and she would work as hard as she had to in order to honour her duty.

‘I’m sorry’, she said. ‘What should we do?’

Ma set down the paperweight and smiled at her. ‘What should you do?’ she said, thoughtfully. ‘What you need to do—both of you—is learn from the girls who have been here longer than you, instead of only talking to each other. You girls eat together, sleep together and talk to customers together. You can’t learn from each other. I will speak to Lily and have her teach you. Okay?’

‘Okay’, Salisa agreed.

‘Okay’, Mali said a moment later.

‘Good’, said Ma. ‘Go fetch her for me now, and for the rest of the night, follow Lily.’

‘You have to learn how to give your customers the girlfriend experience’, Lily announced, as if it was completely obvious.

‘The what?’ Salisa and Mali both responded, looking at the other to confirm that they didn’t know what Lily was talking about either.

‘The girlfriend experience. GFE.’

Salisa and Mali sat down on the floor in the corner of the upstairs room, between the clothes rack and the makeup mirrors. Lily was skilfully applying her makeup as she spoke to them. She hardly needed to look in the mirror; it was second nature to her. She was wearing a tight, sleeveless dress made out of shiny blue

sequins. Her high heels were pointy and silver and looked to Salisa like weapons. Her long hair was smooth and straight, and back to its natural jet black, her platinum blonde wig having been retired several months earlier.

‘You have two goals here’, Lily explained. ‘You need to keep your customers happy, and you need to make as much money as you can. This will keep *mamasan* happy, and your family happy. Everyone will be happy.’ Salisa didn’t think it was the right time to interject anything. She suspected this was to be a lecture, not a conversation. ‘What you have been doing so far, which is what a lot of girls do when they first get here, is just thinking of each customer as a one-time thing, and trying to get through the job as fast as you can to get your money. This is a short-sighted view and it won’t get you anywhere.’

It was true that up until that point, Salisa and Mali had thought that was all there was to their job, going with customers once and getting through it as best they could. Still, Salisa had never much liked Lily. ‘Where will the long-sighted view get you?’ she asked.

Lily laughed. ‘A bar of my own one day’, she said. ‘Just like Ma had once. A rich, *farang* husband, maybe. All I know is that I have plenty of customers of my own, regular customers. Regular customers means regular money. I’m a professional; I’ll never starve. How much regular money do you girls think you’re going to get? Telling this *farang* you’re sick; telling that *farang* you have a baby, or who knows what you tell them. You think men want to become regulars for prostitutes?’

‘But we are prostitutes’, said Mali slowly.

‘Here. I’m going to tell you a secret.’ Lily smiled, and she leaned in close. ‘Don’t act like a prostitute. Just think of yourself as normal girls. You want to get these guys to take you out on dates, to come back to see you and take you out on

dates many times, to buy you presents, to give you money for your family. You want to be their girlfriend. And you can be the girlfriend of many men.'

Salisa and Mali sat and thought about this a while. 'I've never been anyone's girlfriend', Salisa said finally. 'How am I supposed to be someone's fake girlfriend?'

'I like you girls', said Lily. 'Do you like me?'

'No', said Salisa.

'Be that as it may', Lily was unperturbed, 'I know more than you. And I'm gonna teach you.'

The next morning, before dawn, after the bar was closed and clean, Salisa and Mali lay on their mats, not talking to one another.

'How come you cried?' Salisa asked. 'In front of Ma, today?' She stared at the ceiling and listened to the sound of the little traffic on the street outside, most of the businesses closed and no one really around.

'We let her down', Mali said finally. 'She took a chance on us, bringing us here from our villages.'

'You hate her', Salisa snapped. 'Why do you care if you let her down?'

Mali didn't say anything more. Salisa sighed and lay on the mat, trying not to admit to herself that she felt the same way.

It didn't take that long to learn everything Lily had to teach them. They learnt how to get regular customers, how to act like real girlfriends and to keep them coming back. They learnt how to manage multiple regulars coming in at once; how to shift regulars to other girls when there was a need without damaging the connection. They learnt how to write emails to *farang* to keep money flowing in even after the men had long since gone home. They learnt that they needed mobile phones,

and learnt which customers it was safe to give their numbers to and which it wasn't. They learnt many things during the time they spent working in Bangkok at the Lusty Lotus with Lily and Ma.

On 21 July 2003, Salisa's seventeenth birthday, she met Dave. She told him it was her birthday, of course, but told him it was her eighteenth. 'Happy birthday!' He grinned and bought her a drink.

He was twenty-two years old and he was an Australian, which she liked. She found that she got on better with Australians than with any other nationality, still full of fond memories of Christian. Dave was an electrician. She always remembered men by their names, professions, nationalities and ages. She would collect those four pieces of information about her customers first and commit them to memory. If the man didn't speak English well and she couldn't get this information, it was much harder for her to remember them, and it was important to remember them: it made all the difference in securing regulars.

Dave had just finished his apprenticeship and was on holiday for two weeks with two other mates who had just finished theirs. He was a 'good boy', new to Thailand and new to the bars. Exactly the kind of customer that, a few months earlier, Salisa would have tricked into giving her a bit of money without sex in return. Now, after four months under Ma's close scrutiny and trying hard to apply Lily's lessons, thinking all the time of her parents and Khwan, she had gotten used to having sex with her customers, and especially used to customers who seemed more interested in having a paid-for girlfriend than hiring a prostitute. That kind of customer was better in the long run, and she didn't mind anymore having to give the customer as much sex as they wanted in order to get what she wanted.

That night in the bar was Dave and his friends' first night in Bangkok, and they drank too much. 'We're ready to leave', Dave said to her. 'Um. I'm a little bit drunk, and that's maybe why I'm—um—about to ask you what I'm going to ask.'

She smiled; she had known plenty of customers who were nervous about doing this kind of thing for the first time. She always found it oddly sweet. 'What do you want to ask me?' she said.

'Do you—do you maybe want to come with us?' he asked. 'With me?'

'I'll come with you for as long as you want', she smiled, putting her hand on his. 'You just have to pay the bar fine before I can go.'

He seemed confused by this, but when he went to the bar and handed over the five hundred baht as instructed, she figured he had gotten the idea. His friends clapped him on the shoulder when he walked out with her and they got into a taxi. She wondered which hotel they might be going to, and had narrowed it down to two possibilities when the taxi stopped in front of another bar a block over, and they got out. She frowned, confused, and followed him and his friends into the bar.

'Happy birthday', he yelled to her again in the crowded bar. 'Everyone, this is Salisa, and it's her eighteenth birthday. Everybody sing her happy birthday.' The crowd, *farang* and locals, all looked confused but started to sing to her. She told herself she should be embarrassed, thought about Mali and how embarrassed she would be. But this had never really happened to her before, being invited out to another bar by a customer, one who seemed to genuinely like her immediately and cared that it was her birthday. And even though Dave was drunk, he still somehow skirted being boorish. He threw his arms out as he sang to her like an opera singer, his dishevelled hair falling over one eye. She smiled at him and soaked up the



drunken bar songs and listened to his stories about his trade school, his work as an electrician, his life.

All too soon it was the end of the night. One of the friends was passed out on the table. Salisa nudged Dave, who was dreamily staring out into the street. ‘Hey’, she said. ‘Time to go. Where are we going?’

‘Hmmm?’ he asked. ‘We’re leaving? Where am I taking you?’

‘You’re taking me to your hotel’, she laughed. ‘Aren’t you?’

‘Okay’, he said, after an unusually long silence. ‘If you’re sure you want to. You’d—you’d have to sleep in my bed. There isn’t a spare one.’

‘That’s fine’, Salisa frowned, suddenly confused. ‘That’s the whole idea, of course.’

He looked back at her, and suddenly he seemed to realise something. He put his head in his hands.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked. ‘Are you all right?’ She reached out to touch him.

He looked at her hand on his wrist, as if surprised to see it there. ‘I’m really sorry’, he said. ‘I didn’t realise what was going on.’

‘Oh’, she said, and took her hand away, surprised at how reluctant she was to do this.

‘I’m so stupid’, he said. ‘Unbelievably stupid. I—you know I’m not like that, right?’

‘It’s okay if you are’, she said, slightly offended. ‘I work with a lot of people who are like that.’

‘No, you don’t understand’, he said. ‘I just wanted you to come out with us because, um—because I think you’re, you know, *nice*. And fun. And because it’s your birthday. I . . . like you. I wanted us to go out on a *date*.’

She looked at him, astonished to realise from the expression on his face that he was telling the truth. ‘It’s okay’, she said. ‘It was a very nice birthday. It’s fine. I like you too.’

He looked at her again. ‘Okay, well we can go back to my hotel anyway, if you still want to’, he said. ‘And get some sleep.’

She looked him in the eyes, trying to see what he intended. His eyes were conflicted, as if he didn’t himself know.

When they all finally retired to the boys’ one-bedroom suite at the end of the fun-filled, alcohol-soaked night, the other two *farang* slept on the couch and on the floor of the living room. Salisa smiled, realising the boys must be sharing the bed and taking turns sleeping on the couch to save money, instead of booking two rooms. Dave took Salisa awkwardly with him to the queen-size bed and left the door open. She lay back in the covers and waited for him to start initiating sex with her, but soon he was snoring. She turned and watched him snore, his chest, almost hairless, rising and falling under the sheets.

When Dave and Salisa woke up the next day, just after midday, his two friends had already gone out. They had left a note saying they were going to MBK and left some food from the 7-Eleven on the table for Dave and Salisa to eat for breakfast, since they had missed the hotel’s breakfast buffet. It was pretty thoughtful, for guys. Dave and Salisa sat down at the little table in the living room to eat, smiling shyly at each other. Dave was obviously starving and ate three muffins, a ham-and-cheese sandwich and a small box of cereal without milk. Salisa picked at a muffin.

‘You aren’t hungry?’ Dave asked through a mouthful of muffin.

‘Um, no, not really’, Salisa said, starving.

‘You must be starving!’ Dave said, after swallowing. ‘You’re already so thin, you know ... I hope you aren’t on a diet or anything.’

Salisa raised her eyebrows, because she wasn’t sure how to respond.

‘I mean, you look fantastic’, Dave quickly said. ‘You don’t need to go on a diet.’ He shifted in his chair and began wiping at crumbs he thought might be stuck to his face.

Salisa laughed. ‘I wasn’t going to say anything’, she said. ‘But I actually just really hate Western food. I can’t get used to it.’ She was trying to reassure him, but it didn’t elicit the reaction she wanted.

‘Oh my God, I’m so sorry!’ Dave said. ‘That’s so rude of me.’

‘It’s fine’, Salisa said.

‘No, wait’, Dave said. ‘I can get room service. Do you want to order something else to eat? I didn’t think; I just thought everyone ate this stuff.’ She let him order room service. They ordered a spicy papaya salad for Salisa and Dave ate chicken *pad thai*, still hungry.

Salisa was used to overweight, sweaty old men, and had long since taught herself not to care much about looks. But she noticed herself noticing Dave’s tanned, muscular body. She was especially attracted to his smooth, hairless chest. He had slept in his shorts, having taken his t-shirt off and kicked his thongs to the other side of the room before getting into bed. His hair was a mess and he looked like he needed a shave. He looked over at her and she smiled, not bothering to hide that she had been looking at him. He smiled, pleased with himself, and looked her over, Salisa still wearing the dress she had been wearing the night before.

‘Would you maybe like to stay with me today?’ he asked, uncertain. ‘Or do you have to go?’

‘No, I don’t have anywhere to go. I can stay with you as long as you like’, she said. She was surprised at herself; just a few months before she would have been long gone as soon as he had started eating the Western-style food. She had become very good at giving customers ‘the girlfriend experience’, but this time she really felt a little bit like Dave’s actual girlfriend.

‘So what should we do today?’ he said between the last few mouthfuls of his noodles.

Salisa wondered if she should suggest that they have sex. But Dave didn’t seem in a hurry to have sex, she reasoned; he hadn’t tried anything this morning before they got out of bed. Or last night, though maybe he had just been too drunk.

‘We could see a movie? Or, have you seen Siam Ocean World yet? I don’t know, you tell me what you like.’ Salisa and Mali, on Lily’s advice, had memorised a list of tourist activities in Bangkok to suggest to their ‘boyfriends’, but Salisa hadn’t been to any of them yet.

‘That sounds great!’ Dave said quickly, as if he had been planning to agree no matter what she said.

She stayed with Dave every day and night of his two-week stay. They ate all their meals together. He took her with him everywhere he went, and he paid for everything. He always held her hand.

Dave seemed to really want to make Salisa happy. He made sure they only ate at places with Thai food, and even though it was always the Westernised version found in mid- to upmarket restaurants for tourists, it was sweet of him. Once when

Salisa suggested they eat their lunch from a food cart, all three boys shook their heads at the same time, each talking over top of each other to say they had been told they would get food poisoning if they did so.

It was the first time Salisa saw Bangkok as if she were a tourist. It was such a surreal experience, Bangkok as a pleasant, fun place instead of the overcrowded hellhole that had been her home for nearly eight months now.

They didn't have sex until their third night together. It was the longest she had been with a customer before having sex. Although Dave didn't feel like a customer, mainly because he wished he wasn't one. When the tour bus dropped them all off at the front of the hotel in the early evening, the other two boys said they had plans for dinner. They laughed, punched Dave on the arm a few times, and sauntered off down the street.

Dave turned back to look at Salisa, and he looked so adorable and confused that she smiled. 'Where would you like to go for dinner, Dave?' she asked.

'Maybe we could just order some room service?' he replied a little awkwardly.

Salisa smiled again, having heard this line before. When they got up to the room, Dave sat on the bed and Salisa sat next to him. He seemed uncomfortable, and she touched his arm. 'It's okay', she said to him.

He looked at her, face strained. Then he got up and walked to his bag. He took out his wallet and held out three thousand baht. 'Um, after our first date', he began, 'my friends told me that the right amount if ... if we have sex, is three thousand baht, and that I have to give it to you. So I'm paying because ... but I don't think it's right for you to have to ... and I don't agree with ...' He went quiet for a

second. 'I just wanted to *date* you', he finally said, with conviction, and gave her a small, sexy smile. 'But I understand why I have to pay ... so, here.'

Salisa smiled, *waied* while Dave was still holding the money out, and then took it and quickly put it away. She had been worried about this moment, worried that Dave would start to kiss her, and she would have to stop him and explain to him that he would have to pay. It had happened before, and it never stopped being awkward. She liked Dave. She didn't want to have to explain to him that despite the fact that they appeared to be dating, sex was still not free.

The awkwardness of payment was out of the way, and she was free to let everything else happen very naturally. She hadn't felt like this before, hadn't *wanted* to have sex with a man in the entire time she'd been working at the bar. She forgot everything she'd learnt from Lily and from experience; she pounced on Dave, and she kissed him with more passion than he seemed to be expecting. She worried that he was inexperienced, but needlessly; he'd learnt more than wiring during his four-year apprenticeship, and brought her to orgasm with his mouth before he even entered her, and then again when they both climaxed at the same time.

'That was wonderful', he breathed.

'You taste good', she said. 'You should stick to eating Thai food only. Give up Western food altogether.'

He laughed and kissed her again, and she laughed, and they lay in each other's arms and made plans for the rest of their holiday together.

Every night for the first three nights, they had visited the Lusty Lotus for a drink and to pay Salisa's bar fine. On the fourth night, the day after they had sex for the first time, Dave paid Salisa's bar fine for all the remaining eleven nights of his

stay in one go, leaving them free to enjoy their time together without having to visit Patpong every day. Suddenly, without having to go to the Lusty Lotus for over a week, being with Dave stopped feeling like work at all, even on the nights when she collected her three thousand baht and they melted into one another's arms.

Most days, the three boys and Salisa took guided day trips together on minibuses. They went to Safari World, the King's palace and Ayutthaya. They took a tour of the temples in Bangkok and went on a river cruise. They saw movies in first class. Only every so often would Salisa admit that she had never done or seen what they were doing or seeing that day. She didn't want Dave to think of her as someone who spent all her time working in the bar having sex with different men. She wanted him to think of her as a regular Thai girl living in Bangkok, so she tried to act like one.

'You're kidding me', Dave said to her on the river cruise when he and his friends were arguing about which of several movies they'd all seen was the best, and one of them asked her opinion. She replied that she'd never seen a science fiction movie. 'You've never seen a sci fi before? Everyone's seen them. What about *Star Wars*? Didn't you see the latest one when it came out last year? *Attack of the Clones*? It was huge!'

'I grew up in a small village', she said, crossly. 'I didn't have the experiences a lot of people had.'

'But surely you came to the city for something like that', Dave said.

She pointed to the water. 'Look—it's a Thai monkfish. They're very rare, and have brilliant purple scales! It just went underwater.'

They all went to look at her mythical fish, and she leaned on the railing and performed one of the tricks Lily had taught her: to breathe deep, to let her anger at

whatever a customer was saying to her dissipate, and to try to smile and be a sweet girlfriend to them. Lily's advice helped more often than she liked to admit during her time with Dave. There were things the two of them couldn't talk about, like the fact that she had spent almost all of her time in Bangkok at the bar or in hotels with customers, and that the majority of Thai people, her among them, couldn't afford to travel to the city just to see a fancy Western movie, or really to do any of the types of things that tourists do when they visit Thailand, and that Dave had been paying for her to do for most of his trip.

One night after Dave had paid his three thousand baht and they had had a strangely slow, tender round of sex, Dave told Salisa that he had tried to extend his holiday, but his boss wouldn't allow it. He'd thought about quitting, but he had run out of money. He had to go home.

Salisa blinked up at him from where her head rested on his chest. 'Why would you try to extend your holiday?' she asked. 'You shouldn't quit your job. You need to make money in this world.'

'No reason', he whispered, and looked down at her. 'It was just a thought I had.'

She watched him, confused, and ran her hands over his thighs.

He had to leave a few days later. Salisa went with the boys in their taxi to the airport, squished in the middle of the back seat, holding one of their backpacks. It was the first time she had ever seen anyone off at the airport. It was something Lily had mentioned before, during one of her tirades about how best to provide customers with the girlfriend experience. She said it was important that you cry and make sure



they promise to send you money before they leave. Salisa had done it before during her goodbyes at the Lotus, without success, but had no intention of doing so now.

After dropping off their bags and collecting their tickets at the check-in counter, the two boys said a quick goodbye to Salisa, showed their passports to the guard and walked through the glass doors towards the immigration counters and then through into the international terminal. Salisa and Dave stood together in front of the glass doors. They would open for Dave, who had a passport and a plane ticket, but not for Salisa, who had nothing. This was as far as she could go with him.

‘I’ll be earning more now that I’ve finished my apprenticeship. I can come back to see you.’ He didn’t say when, but Salisa decided that was because he didn’t know, not because he didn’t mean it.

‘I will be here waiting’, she said. She knew that Dave knew she would go back to the bar as soon as he left, and that she would be seeing other customers. They hadn’t talked about it, but she knew he wasn’t a fool. And she knew that he didn’t like it, but he wasn’t an unrealistic man. She liked that about him. She suddenly hated that he was leaving.

‘I got you a present’, Salisa said, and handed him what she’d bought him from a stall in the street outside the bar: a leather necklace with a silver pendant of a Chinese character. ‘It says good luck’, she told him.

‘Very fancy’, he smiled. ‘You must have bought that out of all those three thousand baht payments you’ve been collecting.’ He winced as soon as he said it.

She didn’t know why this hurt her so much, but Lily had trained her well. She smiled, and soon she forgot why she had needed to smile. The time was growing shorter and shorter before he’d pass through the glass doors and get on the plane.

‘I got you a present too’, he said, and handed her an envelope. It had her name written on it in small, cramped letters, and a tiny heart drawn next to it. ‘And here’s five hundred baht for a taxi back to Patpong.’

‘Thank you’, she said. She put it in her pocket, already knowing she would save it and catch the train instead. Dave didn’t cry, but he looked like he wanted to. Salisa hadn’t wanted to cry, but she did. She cried big fat tears and smeared them on Dave’s t-shirt. ‘I will really miss you.’

On the train home, she found out that the envelope contained ten thousand baht. She looked at it, then put it into her purse and looked at Bangkok passing by her. She watched the airport recede behind the train cars, imagining she could see the speck of his plane as it took off for another world far beyond hers, like in the science fiction movies he had explained to her and that she had never seen.

## Chapter Ten

More than anything else, where Salisa grew up was *green*. Her village was north of Chiang Mai and, though not far from the hills, was flat. Everywhere she went she saw expanses of rice paddies, coconut trees, frangipani trees—all kinds of tropical trees, bushes and greenery.

In Bangkok, she could hardly breathe. Bangkok was concrete. It was buildings. It was traffic and pollution and noise. The city was so congested it gave Salisa a sinus headache. In her village, she was almost always outside. She cooked and ate outside. She played outside. Even in school, many classes were held outside. She was only really inside to clean Christian and Lek's house, or to sleep.

Salisa hardly spent any time outside in Bangkok and there wasn't any fresh air out there anyway. When she was working, she was in the bar or in a hotel. Sometimes she stood out on the street to shout 'welcome' at passersby, flashing a smile and some skin to entice them inside. But that didn't feel like being outside. The street was so crowded she barely felt the air on her face. In the village, she loved to watch the stars but in Bangkok, the pink neon signs tracing out female breasts or slang terms for parts of her body choked out any stars she might have been able to see.

She didn't seriously expect Dave to contact her again, but one day, about a month after his departure, one of the younger girls ran upstairs to hand Salisa a fat envelope, postmarked in Australia. It was from Dave, full of chatty news about his job, how strange Australia felt after the all-night vibrancy of Bangkok, how much he missed Salisa. She wrote back, and soon another letter came. After a few of these, he

asked if he could call her, and they would talk, sometimes about what was on their minds or happening in their lives, troubles at work, no matter how different their work situations actually were, being the most prominent topic. She never said thank you for the ten thousand baht he had given her; she didn't want to make him feel embarrassed about it. Somehow she wanted him to forget that he had ever paid her for sex; she liked to pretend that he was her close and trusted friend, and soon, she realised that she wasn't pretending anymore, that this had just become true.

In the two years she spent in Bangkok after Ma forced Salisa and Mali to get better at their jobs or leave, when she wasn't working, she was sleeping. Lots of the girls would go out and eat together, or go to clubs to dance and have fun. But once Salisa and Mali set their minds to earning as much as they could, they worked long hours and didn't spend any of their money socialising. The only social life they had was each other. They worked their customers together in the bar (though they never went with any customers together). They ate together, slept side by side and counted their money together. They kept their savings in matching pink plastic Hello Kitty bags, locked in their cupboards, and they wore their keys around their wrists. To begin with, they didn't know what they were saving for. They were only saving to save, because Lily had stressed its importance to them. It was like a game: how much could they earn, and how little could they spend? They always sent home at least half of their earnings every month.

By June 2005, after Salisa had worked in the bar for two and a half years, and Mali nearly three, they were experts. Lots of the girls who were there when they first arrived had moved on, including all of the girls who had come from Salisa's village

with Ma, and many new girls had begun work. Only Lily and about five other older girls had now been at the bar longer than Salisa and Mali.

Salisa preferred younger men because she got on better with them and could actually have some fun 'dating' them. Even more particularly, Salisa liked young men who were on holidays because when they spent their holidays with her, she felt like she was on holiday. But this had the disadvantage that her customers would always leave after a few weeks, so she also had to develop relationships with some of the ex-pats, their best regular customers. Some of the ex-pats were friendly guys that were easy to get on with. Some of them were jaded, grumpy old men who seemed to hate the bargirls they had sex with. The first group of men were easy to be friends with and would often do girls favours, like paying their bar fine so they could go home if they were sick or lending them money when they were short on a payment on their scooter, things like that. But the jaded group were always going on about the lies bargirls told, how they couldn't be trusted, how they weren't good for anything but sex. A group of these regulars once found a cartoon picture of a woman cut off just above the breasts, so it was just a body with legs, a vagina, a stomach and breasts. The words 'The perfect woman' were printed underneath it. A couple of them had it printed on a t-shirt. Salisa tried to stay away from them after that.

Each of the regulars who would frequent the bar at least several times a week had a regular bargirl that he would go with. While it was understood that they went to other bars and had sex with other women, it wasn't seen as acceptable for a man to go with more than one woman from the same bar. Men who did this were called butterflies. And if a bargirl went with a customer knowing that he was a regular of another girl, this would cause her a lot of trouble. Usually more trouble than it was worth.

Salisa and Mali still lived in the upstairs room. They were the most experienced girls living above the bar by far. Lily kept a private apartment and the other girls eventually got tired of the communal living Ma forced them into at first and rented rooms, skimming some of the money from what they sent their families. But Salisa and Mali refused. They wanted to live as cheaply as possible.

Apart from the money they spent on clothes, makeup, food and their mobile phones, they didn't have many expenses. They were very good at budgeting their money and had hardly ever dipped into their savings. They had each only done so on several occasions when their respective younger siblings had needed extra money. They didn't use their money to buy drugs like many of the other girls did and they only drank when their customers paid for their drinks. Both of them were very, very good at sending home the most money possible, evidence of which began appearing in the letters they received from their families: descriptions of the improvements Salisa's father had put into their house, the English textbooks they'd been able to buy for Khwan's schoolwork, the second-hand scooter her mother used to get around the village for supplies without having to walk or wait for a ride. Mali's mother sent her shorter notes, but no less jubilant ones, with thank-you messages from each of her younger brothers. Mali's father had died when she was very young and her mother was too ill to work, so for a long time Mali had been the breadwinner of the family. Each note she received made her feel very happy.

Mali had been snide with Salisa about her experience with Dave. Salisa could have gotten far, far more money out of him than she had, Mali had told her: instead she had wasted all of this time going on cruises, or to temples, or who knew what! It

became a familiar topic of discussion after that. Mali didn't see the sense in Salisa's choices when it came to customers. Dave still sent Salisa money occasionally, sure, but most of the young men on holiday forgot about Salisa when they went home. Mali, since she had started trying to make the most of her job, had consistently chosen older men. Older men usually had more money to spend on her and, she thought, were more grateful for her company, not to mention her young body. She had also developed her trademark of getting them to buy her gold, which she would later sell so she could add the money to her stash of savings. Not to mention the fact that wealthier, older men were more likely to continue to send her money even after they returned home. Mali's Hello Kitty bag was getting decidedly more full than Salisa's was.

'It's not fair', Salisa grumped one afternoon before the bar opened, when the two of them were eating a meal together from a street vendor in front of the Lusty Lotus. 'Your bag is much fatter than mine.'

'I'll tell you what's wrong with you', Mali said, sweetly. 'You get hung up on these pretty young men. You don't think about the bottom line.'

'I always think about the bottom line', said Salisa. 'It's only because of me that you're even good at this at all, you know. You just had ideas. Without me, there's no action.'

'You sound jealous', said Mali. 'I guess it's only natural to be jealous of your elders.'

'Elders', spat Salisa. 'You're six months older. I'm six months smarter. I'm going to get a fatter purse than you, count on it.'

'Time will tell', sang Mali, closing her eyes as she sipped the broth from her soup. Sometimes she could be so sweet that Salisa wanted to strangle her.

Salisa knew that it was wrong to resent Mali for being more successful. Mali's family was much worse off, and she needed the money, and she worked very, very hard for it. But Salisa still hadn't fully forgiven her for not understanding about Dave, and even though the two of them were like sisters, closer in a way than even Salisa and Khwan, Salisa was no stranger to sibling rivalry.

Salisa knew it was terrible to start stealing other people's regular customers, especially the ones that spent the most money, but it didn't stop her. It was easy to steal customers from some of the experienced girls, who could have so many regulars that they slipped up on names and occupations from time to time, or just got careless, or just got tired of the girlfriend experience with so many different men, day in and day out. It was easy, for example, to notice Jason, one of Lily's ex-pat customers, come into the bar on the day Lily had taken off to go visit her family, and it was easy for Salisa to remember how rich he was—he was a journalist and a writer, and he threw a party at the bar and paid for everyone's drinks every time he published a new book, and there had been three parties thrown in the last two years—and it was easy for her to put on her best smile and sit down next to him and slowly take over his custom. Jason was just one of the several Salisa stole from other bargirls that month. She saw him as her greatest success, measured by how much money she earned from him.

'My bag is getting fat', she bragged one night. 'I don't want to count it just yet. Soon we'll count everything. I'm sure I'm going to beat you.'

'You're playing a dangerous game', Mali said, but Salisa just told her she was jealous and went to sleep.



At the beginning of July 2005, a few weeks before her nineteenth birthday, prompted by guilt over Dave's hints that he was planning to do something special for what he thought would be her twentieth birthday, Salisa wrote him a letter to confess that she had lied to him the first day they met, that she was actually turning seventeen that day and was only now turning nineteen. Dave was five years older than her, not four. She was so worried he would be angry with her for lying, and angry because she was only seventeen when they had sex. She knew that wasn't legal in some places in Australia, not that it mattered in Thailand, but she thought it might matter to Dave. It felt like she was holding her breath from the moment she posted the letter until he finally called a few days later. Instead of being angry, he was glad. If he had known she was seventeen then, he would have never asked her out, and they wouldn't be such good friends now, he said. He promised he would still give her the birthday present he planned.

In the middle of July, a week before her birthday, Dave sauntered into the bar with a huge grin plastered across his face, pleased with himself that he had managed to keep his visit a surprise. Though it didn't seem possible, his smile was even brighter when he saw how excited Salisa was to see him. He had come by himself, and stayed for two weeks, again paying Salisa's bar fine for the whole time and spending every moment with her. This time, though, he had booked a separate hotel room for Salisa. He didn't try to kiss her, except on the cheek, and though they held hands everywhere they went, Dave never made a move. While Salisa did get the feeling that he would certainly have been open to it if Salisa had initiated anything, he had already made it clear a long time ago that he would never be her 'customer' again, and she was happy to just spend time with him like they were the oldest friends in the world. It was a wonderful feeling.

The week after her birthday, after Dave had already gone home, Salisa received a letter from Khwan.

*Dear sister,*

*Happy birthday! It's strange to think no matter how old I get, you'll always be older. Now you are nineteen and I am thirteen. When you left, you had just turned sixteen and I was ten.*

*I remember when you were twelve, you started working for Christian and Lek. Christian mentioned it to me when he invited us all over to dinner one night. I am a year older, I should already be working by now! Thank you so much for the money you send, sister: our parents are becoming more important in the village, and people are always coming by to see the television we bought. I hope one day I can also help provide for the family like you. Father said to Mother when I was awake but he thought I wasn't that Lek might be looking for a new maid soon and that you had done so well learning English there that maybe it was time for me to do the same. I have my English lessons with Christian already, but they think I would learn more if I was there all the time working. I hope I can start working soon—I know how much you do for us, sister, and I want to do something for you for once.*

*Everyone here is very well. How is the big city? I laughed when you told me about your friend the farang writer who throws the big book parties, but whose books are not sold outside of Thailand. You meet so many exciting people! I can't wait until I'm old enough to come and visit you!*

*Love, Khwan.*

Salisa read the letter over again several times. Then, taking a notebook and pen, she wrote a letter to her father, telling him that no matter what, he mustn't let

Khwan leave school to go to work full time when she turned fourteen, as Salisa had, after having worked part time from the age of twelve. At least Khwan hadn't begun working yet. She dipped into her savings and wrote that she would transfer an extra five thousand baht that month to underscore the point. She put the letter under her mat to be taken to the post office the next day just before she went to pick her dress and heels for the evening from the rack along the wall.

‘Actually, I’m probably going to be moving to Phuket next month’, Jason told her one night. ‘It’s for my next book. I want to do some research there. I can write from anywhere for the newspaper, and Phuket is a nicer place to be than Bangkok.’ Jason pulled his arm out from underneath Salisa and she readjusted to snuggle next to him, with her head still on his chest. ‘Why nicer?’

‘You’ve never been to Phuket?’

‘No, only my village, Chiang Mai and Bangkok.’

‘The weather is more tropical and there’s the beach; that’s probably the best thing. You can’t beat a tropical island. It’s pretty busy, but nowhere near as busy as Bangkok.’

‘You have been there before?’ Salisa said, cutting him off. Jason, like many journalists, could become very long-winded when he got going, and one of the pleasures of being someone’s regular bargirl is that you didn’t have to be nice to them one hundred per cent of the time; you had the luxury of not always letting them talk.

‘Yeah, plenty of times. The bargirls like it better there too, I reckon. I took a girl with me from Bangkok last time I went and she didn’t come back with me. She got a job there and just stayed.’ Salisa sat up so she could see Jason’s face while she

talked to him. She liked what she had heard so far. She had wanted to leave Bangkok since she first arrived, but never really thought she had an option. ‘So there are bargirls in Phuket too?’

‘Yeah, just like in Bangkok. I mean, there are bargirls everywhere in Thailand.’ Jason looked at Salisa for the first time as if he thought she was a bit of an idiot. ‘In Phuket, most of the bars are at Patong beach. There are plenty of bars there. It’s more expensive there than in Bangkok for us foreigners. The islands are more expensive. Everything is priced like you are only going to be there for two weeks.’

‘Do the bargirls get paid more?’

‘Yeah, a bit more, I guess. Yeah, I think they do.’

‘I’m moving to Phuket’, Salisa announced the next day. ‘I’m tired of Bangkok. You’ll come with me, right?’

Mali folded her fingers and looked at her hands. ‘It’s probably a good idea for you to move’, she said. ‘Everyone in the bar hates you now, anyway.’

‘Of course it’s a good idea’, said Salisa.

‘Ma will hate you’, said Mali. ‘She’ll feel like you’re letting her down.’

‘Let me worry about Ma’, said Salisa. Mali stared at her hands. ‘But you will come with me’, asked Salisa, as the thought entered her mind for the first time that she might not. ‘Won’t you?’

The traffic moved by outside, the younger girls snored, and Mali finally looked up at her friend of two and a half years, the first friend either of them had made in their new lives in the bars.

‘I guess I’d better’, Mali said, closing her eyes. ‘Without me, you’d run off with the first young man you found with a smooth chest.’

‘Without me, you’d never go anywhere or do anything, ever’, Salisa said.

‘I guess we’d better stick together, then’, Mali said quietly.

‘I guess we’d better.’ Salisa smiled, satisfied.

They had to wait until the end of the month so they could collect their wages from Ma. They decided not to tell anyone they were leaving. They knew Ma would be angry and that the older girls would be glad to see them gone. As Mali had said, Lily hated Salisa now, and she hated Mali by association.

In the end, it was one of the easiest things they had done in their whole time in Bangkok. They worked one last night in the bar and convinced Jason to buy both of them drinks without telling him why. They hung their clothes up on the rack and fell asleep for the last time in the room upstairs, looked up at the dirty, peeling ceiling for the last time. They woke up earlier than they normally did. They wrote letters home letting their family know they were moving to Phuket. Then they packed up their stuff, walked down the stairs and out the front door, bought bus tickets, and left.

## Chapter Eleven

With Aidan gone, I spend every night with Salisa and Mali at the bar, and most afternoons chatting away in their room or at a restaurant, even sitting on the beach. I moved from the villa to a cheaper hotel on Chaweng beach, close to the Happy Nights bar. I am feeling less and less like a researcher observing the lives of others and more and more like I'm just living my life. Like this is my life. I wake up when they wake up. I go to the bar when they go to the bar. I eat when they eat. I sleep when they sleep. At the bar, I sit around, I play pool, I talk to the customers. There's only one thing I don't do, really.

Tonight Salisa left early with a customer so it's just me and Mali. It's been raining heavily today, as it does out of the blue every once in a while, so there aren't many people around. We are also getting closer to the end of the high season, not as many tourists left on the island now. I don't think of myself as a tourist anymore.

Mali and I sit at the table at the front so she can call out 'Welcome' to anyone who hurries by, trying to find somewhere to get out of the rain. 'It's dry inside, come inside!' People just smile at her, give me a strange look, and keep walking. We are playing Connect Four and I hate it. Mali always wins. She knows I hate to lose, and every time she gives me a sweet little smile that is just a bit evil. That evil smile is one of the things, oddly, that I love about her.

'Are you bored?' Mali asks sweetly.

'No, I never get bored hanging out here. But there isn't much happening tonight, I guess.' I stare glumly at my plastic chips. It doesn't matter where I put one,

Mali always seems to know what I'm going to do next. 'Perhaps we would have more fun elsewhere?'

'Ah, yeah. We could go somewhere ...' I'm never sure what Mali is going to do or say next. 'Have you been to the Ice Bar? It's a club. Lots of freelancers work there. I could help you find some girls to talk to. They would have interesting stories.'

I perk up a bit. I already know that Salisa and Mali's story is going to be the focus of my research, representative of the lives of many bargirls, but I have been collecting as much information as I can from other women as well. I've already interviewed a few on the side, just meeting with them once or twice. 'Sounds great. No, I haven't been there, but I've seen the flyers everywhere. It's the bar made out of ice, right? You wear a snow jacket to go in?'

'That's the one! I'll just tell the boss that you are going to pay my bar fine and we can go.'

I roll my eyes a little as Mali walks away. I don't mind paying the fine in itself, which is only around ten Australian dollars. And it isn't as if I haven't gotten used to paying their bar fines; I've done so plenty of times already so that I can interview them. I guess what I don't like is the assumption, or perhaps what I don't like is feeling like Mali is working me. I'll be paying her bar fine so we can go to the Ice Bar, where she can leave me with a woman who may or may not want to talk to me while she looks for a customer, since she knows she won't get one at the Happy Nights bar during a slow shift like this one.

In the street, Mali asks if I would prefer a taxi and hails one before I have time to say I'm happy with a *song theow*. She opens the door for me to get in first and then speaks to the driver rapidly in Thai.

‘Don’t worry, I’ve negotiated a good price for you. Two hundred baht, very cheap’, Mali reassures me.

I smile back, telling myself to forget about it. Salisa hates it when I pay for things, and she rarely speaks Thai in front of me either. But Mali has her own charms. Now that I’ve paid her bar fine and for her ride to the Ice Bar, where she is confident that I’ll pay her entry fee and buy her drinks, which I will, she relaxes and switches off for the moment. She plaits my hair for me and giggles while she asks me questions about Aidan. How long have we been married, where did we meet, do I like his family? It’s like we are two girlfriends out on the town at home. It’s easy to forget that the whole purpose of the evening is for Mali to find a man who will pay her for sex and for me to find a woman who will tell me all about what that’s like.

The Ice Bar is even colder than I thought it would be. I’m wearing a puffy snow jacket with a hood and gloves but my bare legs feel frozen. Mali looks even more uncomfortable than me, not used to the cold. Everyone else seems blissfully unaware of the temperature, probably because they are drunk. Mali sweeps her eyes over the bar as soon as we enter, taking everything and everyone in. She points everything out for me, excitedly. The *tuk-tuk* made of ice. The other ice sculptures, elephants and warriors. The ‘ice glasses’ everyone is drinking from. The special flavoured vodka shots advertised at the bar, which she orders for us. I decide against reminding her that I don’t drink, in favour of drinking.

Mali quickly introduces me to a few women, but instead of setting me up to talk to someone so she can head off to find a customer, she finds two seats for us in a relatively quiet, freezing corner and she sits us down. ‘I know you don’t usually drink’, Mali says, sipping her vodka through a straw. ‘But this is a special night. We don’t usually get to spend much time alone.’



I immediately kick myself for assuming Mali was going to ditch me to find a customer. I give her my broadest, guiltiest smile. I don't know what to say in reply, because I don't know if Mali is going to want to 'talk shop' for my research, or if she just wants to hang out. I wait for her to take the lead. She jumps right in.

'Salisa sometimes leaves things out of the story. I want you to have an accurate picture, for your book.' I lean forward. She continues, 'She is so strong, so tough. And she wants everyone to see her that way, so she never tells you about how hard things have been for her, for us. Or about the bad things. She leaves out some of the bad things, I think.' My mind immediately begins to race, trying to guess what Salisa has left out. Did something terrible happen to her, or Mali? Is that why they really left Bangkok to go to Phuket?

Mali must be able to read my mind. 'It's nothing terrible, nothing like—like what happened to Nim. Just little things. How hard it is to go with a customer you hate but you know you have to because you need the money. Or how hard it is sometimes when customers refuse to wear condoms. Some girls end up having lots of unprotected sex. That's how they get sick. They catch syphilis or AIDS. Many of the other girls do drugs, and have been hurt or gotten sick. We have been really lucky; nothing terrible has happened to us. But, you know, those stories you hear about prostitutes in brothels chained to beds and being set on fire ...' She closes her eyes for a second, takes the straw out of her drink and gulps the rest down. 'Stories like that are true, you know. They happen to girls every day. We know bargirls who have been hurt, and even some who have died. Not many, but you know, it happens.'

I gesture to the waitress to bring us two more drinks and I throw the rest of mine back while she makes her way over to us. 'Is that why you left Bangkok?' I ask her. 'Did something like that happen to someone you knew?'

‘Yes and no’, she says, somewhat evasively. ‘Bad stuff happens all the time in this life. It wasn’t something in particular; it was just always there, in the background. We did think that maybe it would be safer on the islands than in Bangkok. Less crime. Salisa thought there might be a higher class of tourist on the islands as well, since Jason told her it is more expensive for tourists on the islands than in Bangkok. But I think men are the same everywhere.’

Mali spends the rest of the night telling me things that Salisa has been glossing over. She fills me in on how draining their job can be, how they have had to work hard to avoid drinking too much or doing drugs, like many of the other bargirls do to get by. How they try to select their customers to avoid getting into trouble, but how it is always in the back of their minds that they are going home with a stranger who could hurt them. She tells me about having to get checked for STDs regularly, about the scares they have had when customers have refused to wear condoms. About the girls they have known who became pregnant, or caught something, or were raped, or beaten. I ask about all the worst things one at a time, all the things I have read about, and Mali always knows someone it has happened to.

By the end of the night, I am both drunk and sad. But I feel closer to Mali and see that she is strong, too, like Salisa, but in her own way. Salisa doesn’t let anything or anyone in. Mali lets everything and everyone in, but survives anyway.

## Chapter Twelve

Salisa and Mali had been in Phuket for just over a month when Mali first spotted the man that she would marry. Salisa wasn't impressed.

The night before, they had both been taken back to the same hotel, different rooms, by two best friends who had picked them up from their new bar, the Spicy Mango on Bangla Road in Patong. It was about three quarters of an hour in the taxi from Patong beach to their customers' hotel in Phuket Town, and when the girls finally woke up and left the hotel the next morning, they were in no particular hurry to get back.

'This is what I'm talking about', said Salisa, gesturing to nothing in particular. 'This is why we had to get out of Patong. This is the real Thailand.'

Mali giggled. 'What do you mean, the real Thailand? All of this is the real Thailand.'

'Patong isn't the real Thailand. Neither is Patong', said Salisa, shaking her head. 'Patong is a tourist resort.'

'I suppose that's why we do well there', said Mali.

They walked down the crowded street, listening to the crackle of the electric cables that hung so low in places they nearly scraped their heads. There was a restaurant there, a well-dressed *farang* who appeared to be in his fifties, sitting alone at a table at the front. Instinctively, Salisa and Mali slowed down and began to strut a bit.

'That's what I mean', Salisa said. 'Tourists. How much money do you think that guy has?'

‘He isn’t looking at you’, said Mali. ‘He isn’t looking at me, either.’

‘Good’, laughed Salisa. ‘After all, we haven’t started working today.’

They crossed the road and stood outside of Swensen’s, watched the middle-class Thai families inside on their Sunday outings eating giant, extravagant bowls of ice cream, and tried to decide whether to go inside or to take a taxi back home.

‘I think he likes that waitress’, said Mali.

‘Who?’ asked Salisa, squinting at the ice cream menu through the window.

‘The *farang* I’ve been watching across the road’, said Mali.

‘You’re still watching him?’ asked Salisa. ‘How can you tell he likes the waitress?’

‘He’s been looking at her the whole time, watching her walk around the restaurant’, Mali said. ‘He’s wearing a Tag Heuer watch. His shirt is Hugo Boss. He looks like he is dressed casually, but his outfit still probably cost *thousands of dollars*.’

‘How do you figure these things out about people all the time, I mean down to the brand of their watch?’ asked Salisa.

‘How do you *not* do that?’ asked Mali, in return. ‘You need to learn. Don’t worry, *I’ll teach you!*’

Now Salisa rolled her eyes. She scanned up and down the road, wondering if they should pay extra for an air-conditioned taxi or if they should just take a *tuk-tuk*.

‘I asked you how much money you thought he had and you didn’t answer.’

‘I was watching how he looked at the waitress’, Mali said. ‘He was staring at her, but he didn’t look at us for a moment.’

‘Yeah, because we look like bargirls and she looks like she could be his wife.’

‘Exactly my point’, said Mali.

‘What point?’ asked Salisa.

Mali wasn’t listening. She had grabbed Salisa’s arm and was pulling her down the road in the direction of the Robinson department store. In the public restrooms behind the toy section on the third floor, Mali quickly scrambled into the outfit she had just bought from the women’s section on the floor below. She threw her glittery dress, high heels and all her jewellery into the Robinson plastic bag and shoved it towards Salisa as she exited, now wearing a light blue polo t-shirt, short white skirt and plain white thongs. She had rinsed off all her makeup, reapplying only a thin layer of light pink lipstick, and taken down her hair.

‘Okay, now I look like I could be his wife. Right?’

‘You look like something’, Salisa said.

Mali sighed at her, taking some of her things out of her oversized, bright green plastic handbag (purchased in Patong only a week ago) and putting them into the small white clutch she’d just bought. ‘You go back to Swensen’s with my stuff and watch’, she said. ‘If everything works out, I’ll meet you later. Otherwise, I’ll pay for our taxi back home. Okay?’

She didn’t wait for an answer. Salisa stood in the aisle of the toy section and watched her best friend walk to the escalators, listening to the slap of her new, clean white thongs.

Salisa took a seat inside Swensen’s next to the window at the front where she could see across the road. The *farang* was still there, eating bread and waiting for his meal to arrive. She watched Mali stroll casually into the restaurant and sit down at the table opposite his, facing him.

After a closer look at the man, Salisa, though unimpressed, could see the logic in Mali's pick. Mali had tried this twice before, picking up men outside of the bar, and on both occasions she had been successful. In fact, while she was pretending she wasn't a bargirl and couldn't ask outright for money for sex, both times she had ended up better off financially from 'dating' these men for several weeks than if she had charged them the usual way. She had sex with them less often and received more presents and money, and she made sure to let Salisa see as she counted the money she got from them, folded it and added it to her Hello Kitty pouch. Both of the men she'd picked up, in fact, still sent her money every month from their home countries, where they had returned to their wives and families. She was clearly hoping to achieve a similar arrangement this time. Salisa sipped her soft drink and watched Mali try not to look at her prey.

This time, he did look at her. He did more than look at her; he stared, a goofy smile on his face. Mali acted even shyer and more coy than normal. *Shameless*, thought Salisa. But as shy as Mali was acting, it was she who made the first move, using the English Salisa had taught her.

'Erm, excuse me, I'm so sorry to bother you, but could you tell me how long you have been waiting for your meal? I'm so hungry and the waitress said it would only be a few minutes, but you look like you might have been here a while', she ventured. She knew her English was better than the waitress's. And she was prettier than her as well. And the man seemed to notice.

'Yes, I have actually been waiting almost half an hour. I think it's the longest I've had to wait for food since I've been here.' He sounded like he was actually very annoyed and frustrated, but was trying to conceal it so as to appear friendly.

'How terrible', Mali said. 'How long have you been in Phuket?'

‘Two months now. I am here on business.’ He had to raise his voice a little so Mali could hear him from the next table. He shifted in his seat, as if trying to move closer to her.

‘That’s even longer than me’, said Mali. ‘I have only been here two weeks. I am from Isaan, in the northeast of Thailand. I’m here visiting a friend.’ (‘You’re such a liar’, Salisa shrieked at her, later, when she heard the story.) ‘What kind of business brings you to Phuket?’ Mali continued. ‘From ... ?’

‘From Australia’, said the man. ‘Hotels. I’m building a new hotel here. Look, perhaps you would like to join me. You’re here alone, isn’t that right?’

‘Yes, my friend, she has left me all alone today! I would love to join you.’

‘Your friend is a she?’ said the *farang*.

‘Yes’, smiled Mali. She picked up her small clutch and sat down in the chair closest to the man, crossing her legs towards him. ‘My name is Mali’, she said, giving him a *wai*.

He returned it. ‘I am William, but you can call me Bill.’

‘Bill.’ Mali smiled.

Salisa, still watching from across the road, rolled her eyes at Mali’s quick victory, then returned her attention to her strawberry sundae. Mali was allergic to strawberries, so Salisa only ate them when she was angry with her friend.

On the other side of the road, things were going very well for Mali. She had created a believable and attractive backstory for herself and it was obviously working on Bill, who seemed enthralled by her. He had slid his chair closer to Mali’s three times in only five minutes. As far as Bill knew, Mali ran a successful rice farm in Isaan that was owned by her sick mother, who could no longer work. She had two younger brothers, twelve and thirteen, whom she was supporting to finish school,

which was true. She told him her real age, nineteen; something in the way Bill was looking at her told her that he liked women who were much, much younger than he was. She was here visiting a friend, Salisa, who went to the Prince of Songkla University and was finishing her Bachelor of Business Administration in Hospitality Management to become a hotel manager. ('Prince of what university?' Salisa asked, later. 'Look it up', said Mali. 'It pays to know the name of a university in an emergency.')

There were only a few things that Mali needed to know about Bill. One, which she'd already figured out for herself: he was rich. He lived in Australia but spent a considerable amount of time abroad on business, specifically in South East Asia, and more specifically, Thailand. He was divorced. And he was hoping to meet a wife in Thailand. He didn't say that last part; Mali had figured that out for herself, too.

Salisa had eaten two sundaes, drunk three soft drinks, and felt very sick by the time she saw Mali try to reach for the check. Bill stopped her, she pretended to protest, and then sat back and agreed to be paid for. Salisa paid her own check at the register and stood outside Swensen's holding Mali's things. Mali and the old man stood up together, still talking. The man gestured down the street and Mali nodded with a bright smile on her face. They began to walk away together. Salisa stared at Mali's face, waiting for her friend to give her some kind of sign; Mali never looked back at her.

Salisa, annoyed, hailed a taxi. It was a particularly scorching day and she didn't feeling like having the hot wind blow dust in her face in a *tuk-tuk* on the way back to Patong. As the car sped down the road, she crumpled the edge of the Robinson bag with all of Mali's things in it, and thought about tossing it out of the



window, but instead kept it in her lap, rested her head on the back seat and tried to prepare herself for work that evening.

## Chapter Thirteen

Salisa didn't see Mali again for three weeks. She did get one phone call a few days after Mali had left her at Swensen's.

'Hi', she barked when she recognised Mali's number. 'Give me all the details. How rich was he? How old did he turn out to be? Could he get it up?'

'Hello, Salisa', said Mali in an expansive, fakey voice. 'How are you doing?'

'As well as you can expect, you buffalo', laughed Salisa. 'You completely ditched me! Why are you talking in English?'

'Oh, that's too bad', said Mali. 'No, no, please don't apologise.'

'Me, apologise?' frowned Salisa. 'Have you gone crazy, Mali? Did the *farang* have syphilis or something?'

'No, I understand that you are busy', Mali continued, and suddenly Salisa got it. She wrapped one arm around herself, held the side of her stomach tight with her nails, and kept the phone pressed to the ear. 'No, no, I completely understand. It is so important that you concentrate on your exams. It is so important to get a good education.'

'I'm getting an education about some things, yes', said Salisa.

'No, I will keep busy', said Mali. 'I met a nice man who is here on business and we will go ahead and see the island together.'

'I'm going to keep your dress', said Salisa. 'And your heels. Or maybe, I'll sell them. Plenty of girls will want such nice things.'

Mali laughed, a completely fake, rhythmic laugh. 'Yes, he is a very nice person indeed!' she said. 'All right, Salisa. Do not study too hard, now!'

‘Go to hell’, said Salisa.

‘You too, dear’, Mali said sweetly, and hung up.

After that, Salisa got one text message per day for a week, each time only saying that Mali wasn’t coming to work that night and could Salisa cover for her.

Salisa took all of Mali’s things out of the Robinson bag and spread them on her bed, then wrote down the price she could expect to get for each item. Once she’d written it all down and had the grand total, which wasn’t very much, she looked at it all again, then put it back in the Robinson bag and stored it with her own things, lay down and looked at the ceiling of what was, even after a month, still a very unfamiliar room, and getting more unfamiliar all the time.

The new job paid a bit more, yes, but it was harder work; in addition to talking to the customers, they had to spend time on stage dancing, either in bikinis, or with the tops of the bikinis off. It was hard, physical work, and although Salisa made the best of it, thinking about the exercise she was getting, Mali had hated it from moment one. Even though it was the kind of money they dreamed of back in Bangkok, still Mali didn’t come back to work. Salisa covered for her each night of that first week, saying that Mali was sick, and each night her new *mamasan* told her that was okay, but that Mali would be fined three hundred baht per night for not coming to work. Salisa knew the fine wouldn’t matter. Mali would be making far more money from being with this guy than the cost of the fine.

The two girls that Salisa and Mali shared a room with, Jum and Joy, had to lie for Mali as well. No one liked to lie to *mamasan*, for fear of the consequences if they were caught, but everyone did it. If Mali wanted to go with this guy, she was supposed to have him meet her at the bar every night to pay her bar fine, or pay the fine in advance, for an agreed period. But the only way Mali’s plan was going to

work was if this man didn't find out that she was a bargirl. Men will have sex with bargirls, give them all their money and even become real friends with them, but they don't usually marry them. And if they do, it doesn't last very long. After all, how could they ever trust each other not to cheat? When the man met his wife, she was getting paid to have sex, and when the woman met her husband, he was paying for it.

At the end of that week, Salisa got the following text message from Mali: 'Tell *mamasan* I quit.' Salisa did so immediately.

Of course *mamasan* was angry, and Salisa liked that a little. It was nice to have someone to be mad at Mali with besides Jum and Joy, who didn't particularly like her either, Salisa thought.

'How could she do this', said *mamasan*. 'How could she betray us this way?'

It was different when one of them was off with a customer, even if they spent weeks with them. It was different because the one who was away would always come home, tell stories about the customer's habits or quirks—or, more rarely, his virtues—and the two of them would get a soft drink together and compare the money building up in their pink bags. Mali's Hello Kitty purse had been sitting, abandoned, for some time. Salisa showered and went to work and went with customers and went to sleep, and repeated the whole cycle over again, and thought about how since the first day she'd arrived in Bangkok, she and Mali had been together.

'Mali is gone', Salisa said to Jum and Joy one night when the two of them asked where their fourth roommate had been lately. 'She quit. She's getting married or something, or thinks she is.'

'That's wonderful', said Joy, her eyes getting wide. 'Congratulations to her.'

'It's all a crazy illusion', said Salisa. 'Obviously he can't have agreed to support her already, so quickly. Something weird is going on.'

‘Aren’t you two best friends?’ asked Jum. ‘Aren’t you happy for your friend?’

‘She is more like my sister. Sometimes people hate their sisters.’

On a Friday three weeks later, Mali reappeared. Salisa came home at five in the morning and found Mali fast asleep on the mattress next to hers in their one-bedroom apartment. On the other side of the room, Jum and Joy’s mattresses were empty. They must have gotten lucky and found customers to take them for the whole night. Mali was snoring softly, and the two of them were alone.

Salisa threw her bag loudly on her own mattress and slammed the door behind her. Mali didn’t move. Salisa kicked her shoes in the corner and slumped down on her bed. She coughed. Still nothing. She stood up, crossed the floor, put her hands on Mali’s shoulders and started to shake her. ‘Mali!’ she shouted. ‘Hey, Mali! Is that your name? I used to have a best friend named Mali, I think, who looked kind of like you.’

‘I’m tired’, Mali grumbled, rolling on her side with her back towards Salisa.

‘You can be tired later’, said Salisa. ‘What happened to you? Where have you been?’

‘I’ll tell you in the morning’, Mali grumbled.

‘It is the morning’, snapped Salisa, but Mali was asleep again.

Mali was still asleep at midday when Salisa woke up. Salisa got dressed, thinking about whether or not to wake Mali, but Mali looked exhausted and she couldn’t bear to disturb her, especially after how rude she had been to her that morning. She left to run errands and to see if there was any cash she could withdraw

from the bank account she had opened while in Bangkok to receive money from overseas. Then she walked to the internet café to check her email.

She smiled when she saw an email from Dave, the kind she looked forward to the most, and she moved her lips as she silently read it out to herself.

*Dear Sassy,*

*Sawasdee! How are you? Have you heard from or seen Mali yet? I know how worried you've been.*

*My Thai is getting better, by the way. I do the exercises in my study guide every night after work and I aced the test they gave me at TAFE last week. I still can't believe I'm actually going to night school! Even if it is just once a week. I thought I would be done with study forever when I finished my apprenticeship. But you're worth it. I mean, it's rude of me not to learn your language, right? Just try not to laugh at me next time I try my Thai out on you over the phone, okay?*

*I'm going to deposit some money in your account tomorrow for you to buy a camera, a good one, so you can send me some pictures of where you are living in Phuket. I've never been there, and it's hard for me to picture you where you are now. I keep picturing you in Bangkok. I am glad you left Bangkok, you do sound happier. The girls you are working with sound a lot nicer too.*

*Your friend, Dave*

She looked at the closing and tapped her fingers on the rim of her free glass of water. This was the first time he hadn't written 'Love, Dave.' For two years, he had always written 'love' and Salisa had not. Dave wasn't like her other customers, who she stringed along after they left so they would continue to send money. She didn't think of him as a customer at all, not even when she was with him in Bangkok the first time, really. Salisa always tried to be honest with Dave. She wanted him in

her life, as a real friend. She definitely didn't like taking money from him. She said it aloud: 'Your friend, Dave.' She couldn't tell whether or not she liked the way it felt.

When she got back, Mali had woken up and was sweeping out the room.

'Yes', Salisa said. 'Work for me. It's the best apology I could possibly get from you for being such a bad friend.'

'I apologise for nothing', said Mali sweetly. 'I had just forgotten how much of a pig you are without me here to look after you.'

Salisa snickered, took one of the bananas she'd bought, and tossed it to Mali. Mali didn't even try to catch it; just let it land on the ground then stooped to pick it up.

'So, where were you?' asked Salisa. 'What happened?'

'I want to marry him', Mali announced. 'He bought me a scooter.'

Salisa closed her eyes and chewed her mango. She had seen the shiny new pink and white Isuzu scooter out front of their place, but she assumed it belonged to someone from one of the other apartments in their long block. 'How did you manage that?' Salisa asked, flopping down on her mattress. 'It's only been three weeks and two days.'

'That's the best part', said Mali. 'I don't have to really get him to do anything, he just does it by himself!'

'And you have nothing to do with it', said Salisa. 'You just smile, and speak the English I taught you, and tell him God knows what, and act like his sweet little wife already, not some trashy bargirl.'

'Don't be rude', said Mali. 'I'll tell you the whole story.'

She began to tell it, filling in the gaps from when Salisa had last seen her, walking away in Robinson and then sitting with the old *farang* in the restaurant across the street.

‘He had already been here for eight weeks when we met’, said Mali, ‘but I guess I was the first pretty young Thai woman to speak to him in intelligent English *and* be interested in him. I told him I was here visiting from Isaan, so he knew I didn’t have a scooter here and he bought me one. He even put money in my bank account to buy another one for back home, because it had broken down.’

‘Home where? What had broken down?’

‘In Isaan. The scooter I had there. I’ll buy one for my brothers really; I don’t need one there, maybe for when I visit. I can probably afford to visit every year now, like lots of the girls do.’

‘Oh good’, said Salisa, head pressed into her pillow.

‘He knows my mum is sick, which of course she really is’, Mali continued, ‘so he thinks the scooter there is for me, when I go back to the farm. And he said I can give this one to you when I leave Phuket.’

‘Nice of him to think about me’, said Salisa. ‘He must have been really worried about me studying too hard at Prince of Whatever University to see my best friend.’

‘I’m sorry about that’, sighed Mali. ‘You know that was necessary.’

‘What do you mean when you leave Phuket?’ asked Salisa.

‘He’s a good man’, said Mali. ‘He’s looking for a wife, not a prostitute. And I’m his girlfriend. He is going to take care of me.’

‘You didn’t answer the question’, said Salisa.



‘No, silly, I’m not leaving’, said Mali. ‘He just thinks I *would* be leaving, when my holiday is finished. To go back to my farm. But if everything goes well, I won’t need to go back to the farm. I’ll stay with him, and just send money home.’

‘After three weeks and two days’, said Salisa.

‘Why do you keep saying that?’ asked Mali, and she dropped her broom and sat down on the foot of Salisa’s mattress. ‘What’s so wrong with thinking he might be in love with me after three weeks and two days?’

Salisa looked at her friend; she was shaking a little as she sat at the end of the bed. ‘Mali’, she said. ‘Don’t you think he might be just looking for a girlfriend while he’s here?’

‘No’, Mali snapped. At least she’d stopped trembling.

‘You quit your job’, said Salisa. ‘It’ll be hard to get it back. What if he, I don’t know ...’

‘But he won’t.’

‘Okay’, said Salisa. Outside the window, a woman from an apartment at the other end of the block was calling for her children to come back inside. ‘What have you been doing?’ Salisa asked.

‘Staying with him in his hotel’, Mali said. ‘Dressing in the nice clothes he has bought me, because I said I didn’t bring enough clothes with me on my holiday. And I was only supposed to be here for two weeks, but I extended my holiday to stay with him.’ Mali spoke about the world she had created as if it were real. ‘I go with him for his business meetings. Sometimes I even help translate! Well, once. And I look after him. I order his meals and clean up and do his laundry. I pick his outfits in the morning and I even brush his hair. He really likes it when I do things to look after him. He always buys me a present after I do something like that. I think he has

bought me something every day. It's all back at his hotel still. He *kept* his room there with all his things, even though he is going away for *two weeks*.'

'Why are you back here today', Salisa asked, 'if things are going so well?'

'Like I *just* said, he is going away for two weeks. Flying to Bangkok to meet with some business partners. He and his partners are building a new resort here. He owns *hotels*, Salisa! He wanted to take me with him, to Bangkok, but I said I had to come and see you because you were worried that I had been gone so long. Really, I just needed a break from him and I *didn't* want to go back to Bangkok. He thinks I've never been there.'

'It's good that you weren't actually worried about me', said Salisa.

'You know what I mean', said Mali. 'Why would I worry about you? You're tougher than anyone, Salisa.'

'And when he comes back?' Salisa asked.

'Then I will go and stay with him again. I hope this one lasts a long time. He gave me money, look.' Mali reached over to the other side of her bed and pulled a fat envelope out of her bag. It was stuffed with thousand baht notes.

'Why do you need a break from him if you are so happy?'

'Salisa.' Mali looked at her for the first time as if she didn't understand anything. 'This is a good man, yes. I like him, I suppose. But he is fifty-six years old! Thirty-seven years older than me!'

'But you're still in love with him', Salisa said.

'You know I'm not in love with him', Mali said.

'I didn't know that', Salisa said. 'I thought you wanted to be his wife. Why would you do that if you aren't in love with him?'

Mali sighed. 'I can enjoy being with him sometimes, a bit', she said. 'But I don't want to be with him all the time. He is a means to an end. Having sex with just one old man for money is better than having sex with many.'

Salisa saw the logic. She wondered if she could do that herself, stay with someone she didn't love. She didn't think she could, not even if she found someone who wanted to take care of her so she could stop working. She thought of what Dave had written to her, thought of how she wasn't in love with him. He'd written 'your friend', and she'd liked it.

'I told him that for every week I don't return to the farm, we lose money, because I am the only one who can run it', Mali was saying. 'Because my mum is sick. And we lose lots of money every week. So if he wants me to stay with him, he has to help me, and send money to my mum. It was his idea!'

'It doesn't sound like his idea', Salisa said.

'It was a little bit both our ideas', Mali admitted.

'And you really think he's looking for a wife?' Salisa asked after a moment.

'Yes', Mali said confidently. 'He thinks I would make a good one because I am obviously intelligent enough to learn good English and to run a farm on my own, but still I am innocent and sweet because this is the first time I have been away from my village.'

Salisa closed her eyes and flopped back on her bed. Mali stretched out next to her. 'I can stay with you for two weeks, and I don't have to work at the Mango', she said. 'Take some time off from the bar, Salisa! No, quit, like I did. We can have a holiday; I have money! We can afford to *not work*, for the first time *ever*. You can get another job at another bar after, if *mamasan* won't give you your job back.'

‘A holiday?’ Salisa hadn’t had a single day off since they travelled from Bangkok to Phuket. Before that she hadn’t had a day off in so long she couldn’t remember.

‘We can send for Khwan, and have a holiday together’, Mali suggested.

‘Wouldn’t it be nice to see your sister?’

Salisa turned. Mali smiled at her.

‘Really?’ Salisa asked.

‘Of course’, Mali said. ‘There’s enough money. And I’ve read all your letters. I would love to see Khwan. It’s like you’re both my sisters.’

‘I think what you’re doing is a terrible idea’, said Salisa. ‘I want you to remember I said that to you.’

Mali frowned. ‘How could you say that to me?’ she asked. ‘When I’ve just offered something nice to you?’

‘I know’, said Salisa. ‘I’m trying to be nice to you, too. Forget it. Thank you.’

‘What are friends for?’ smiled Mali.

They wrote a letter to Khwan and included detailed instructions on how she could catch the bus from Chiang Mai to Phuket. They included money for her tickets and her food and told her to always sit up the front with the driver. She could only come one week because Salisa didn’t want her to take too much time off school. The first week of their holiday Salisa and Mali would be on their own, and then Khwan would join them.

They pulled all of the notes out of the envelope and made sure they had enough to send the normal amount home for the month, pay the money Salisa would be fined for not going to work, since she was too nervous to just quit, cover their expenses, and have extra for the holiday. There was more than enough.

‘I am Mali and I run a good farm in Isaan. I can afford to have a holiday once a year. And you are a university student, Salisa. You are on your term break’, Mali fantasised, not knowing when term break was. ‘For the next two weeks, we aren’t bargirls. No men. No *farang*. Just us women.’

Salisa and Mali started their holiday that day. The first thing they did was go to Karon beach, for the first time. Karon was the second most popular beach on Phuket, after Patong. They didn’t want to go to Patong to be reminded of work.

They wore the bikinis that they had bought from a stall for tourists just outside the Spicy Mango on Bangla Road one night before work during their first week in Phuket. They bought them thinking they would never get time to go to the beach, but hoping that a customer might take them there. So far, they had spent a bit of time sitting on the sand at Patong watching their customers ride around recklessly on jet skis (usually drunk), but they hadn’t ever been swimming in them.

Karon looked like the beaches in all the postcards for sale all over Thailand. In fact, in many cases, it *was* the beach in the photos. Having spent little time near the ocean, Salisa and Mali thought it was the most stunningly beautiful place they had ever seen.

The ocean was sparkling and the water was a perfect, clear blue, the kind of water they could swim in and see right down to the bottom like they were looking through glass. The sand was bright white and stretched around in a gentle curve. As far as they could see, the beach was lined with colourful deck chairs and umbrellas. They were all in pairs. Two deck chairs would be close together, sharing an umbrella with a table between them. Each large group of chairs was the responsibility of one

Thai person, usually a man, who would charge tourists one hundred baht each to sit in the chair all day.

They took off their dresses to reveal their matching bikinis (Salisa's in blue and Mali's in pink), and were quickly escorted to a pair of chairs. Mali tried to pay the one hundred baht, but the man shook his head.

'He thinks our bikinis will encourage tourists, male tourists, to sit near us, in his section', Salisa said. 'He probably hopes they'll offer to buy us drinks, and he can make a nice profit from them.'

'I think it's free because only tourists have to pay', Mali said. 'The chairs are free for Thai people.'

'Sometimes I can't tell if you're smarter than me or stupider', Salisa said.

'How strange', said Mali, sniffing. 'I never wonder about that.'

Settling in the chairs and making sure the umbrella cloaked them in shade (not wanting to darken their skin), they looked out and watched the tourists swimming and frolicking in the clear blue water.

Around them, several European women had taken off their bikini tops to sunbake, revealing their mostly leathery, over-tanned breasts. Salisa thought this was incredibly disrespectful. Some Thai girls might go topless in the bars, but doing it out in public was something totally different. Mali was also shocked to see women deliberately trying to darken their skin.

Every fifteen or twenty minutes, a man carrying an esky over his shoulder and a Streets sign showing pictures of various ice creams would walk past and smile at them. The man walked up and down the beach all day. Every two minutes or so someone would pass by with various things to sell to the tourists. Dresses, necklaces, fruit, corn on the cob, and cold, stale donuts.

Late in the day, they noticed two *farang* watching them. The men smiled, and Salisa smiled back. The men walked over. They were young, dark hair baked lighter by the sun.

‘Hello’, said one of the men. ‘Do you speak English?’

‘Of course’, smiled Salisa. ‘Where are you gentlemen from? My name is Salisa, and this is my friend Mali.’

‘Hello’, said Mali shyly.

‘Hello’, said the leader of the two men. His friend hung back, looking nervously from side to side. ‘It’s a pleasure to meet you, Salisa and Mali. I’m Carl and my friend is Ryan. We’re from America.’

‘You’ve come a long way’, giggled Salisa. ‘Do you want to sit with us?’

‘No’, said Carl, and licked his lips. ‘So ... how much would you and Mali charge for me and my friend? Uh, short time.’

‘Short time’, agreed Ryan quietly.

Salisa’s face stiffened. She turned to the man in charge of the chairs. ‘Hey!’ she shouted in Thai. ‘Get these *farang* out of here! Hurry! Get them out of our sight!’

‘They need to go’, Mali said to the Thai man as he approached, much more quietly but no less furious, pointing at them with an angry, shaking finger.

The chair man looked at the two *farang* and at the two girls who’d been drawing in business for him all day, and made his decision. He started shouting at the men. ‘Go’, he shouted. ‘Get out of here.’

‘We were just talking’, whined Carl. ‘We weren’t even doing anything.’

‘Don’t care’, said the man. ‘You must leave, now.’

The *farang* left, cursing in English. Salisa let out a breath and sank back into the chair. ‘Thank you so much’, she said.

‘What did they do?’ asked the chair man.

‘They tried to buy us for sex’, said Mali, furious.

‘We aren’t even working’, said Salisa.

The chair man shook his head. ‘If they come back, let me know’, he said. He gave each of them a free soft drink. ‘Some people don’t know how to behave in this country.’

A little less than a week after Salisa had posted her letter, she was picking Khwan up from the bus stop in Phuket Town.

She hadn’t seen her sister in nearly three years. The last time she saw her, Khwan was only ten years old. Now she was thirteen. In such a short time, she had grown from a child into a young woman.

Khwan took her English lessons with Christian seriously. Salisa’s parents made sure she took them seriously because of their arrangement with Ma, that she would come to visit after Khwan had turned sixteen and take her to work in her ‘restaurant’, as she had done with Salisa. Salisa had a different opinion. She was determined that Khwan would learn English so that her sister would *not* follow in her footsteps. Khwan should finish high school and go to university, to study business or something else that would lead to a real career. You needed to have good English to get a good job in Thailand. Ever since Khwan had sent her the letter telling her that their parents wanted her to work, Salisa had been sending extra money, from her savings if she had to, to keep Khwan in school, and out of the race for money that had become everything to Salisa.

Khwan was excited to see Salisa again, and to meet Mali for the first time. She ran towards them as soon as she spotted her sister in the crowd of people waiting



for the passengers to disembark and they hugged for a long time. Khwan was wearing old sandals, dark blue fisherman's pants and a white cotton shirt. She had only a very small bag with her, a Hello Kitty backpack that her cousin Dao had given her in Chiang Mai on her way to Phuket. Salisa looked her up and down.

'You look like a farmer's daughter', she said. 'Haven't you bought yourself any nice clothes with the money I have been sending you?'

'I am a farmer's daughter', laughed Khwan. 'So are you!'

Mali smiled. 'I like your sister already', she said to Salisa.

Salisa made a face at her friend, then frowned at Khwan. 'You didn't answer my question about clothes.'

'No, mum and dad don't let me keep the money you send me', said Khwan. 'I give it to them and then they use it for all of us. For food, for the house, for the farm.' She looked away as she said this and she sounded as if she was trying hard to make her voice light and happy.

'But I send them money for those things', Salisa said. 'The money I send to you is for you, for your clothes, school books, school uniform. And so you don't have to work, so you can just study.'

'Mum and dad buy my books and my uniform', she said quietly. Salisa frowned and opened her mouth to say something angrily, but she caught sight of Mali out of the corner of her eye. Mali was shaking her head and frowning. Salisa put on a smile and suggested they go out for lunch.

Khwan had never been able to keep anything from her older sister; as soon as she felt safe, she would open up. Salisa hoped nothing had changed, and nothing had: once they were squeezed together in the back of a *tuk-tuk* and Salisa had her arm around Khwan protectively, she started talking.

‘Nui uses most of the money for himself’, she said. ‘He is a terrible brother to me and brings dishonour to our parents. He isn’t working. He drinks and he gambles, and he doesn’t help with the farm. He is angry all of the time and he hates me, Salisa. He thinks I should be working.’

‘Does he hit you?’ Salisa asked in a low voice, remembering how her brother treated her as she was growing up, though he was only one year older than Salisa. Khwan didn’t answer her sister’s question. Her parents had taught both of them never to say anything against their brother; Khwan had maybe done a better job of learning the lesson than Salisa had. It didn’t matter. Salisa knew the answer to the question when she asked it.

They took Khwan to Karon, where they walked along the main tourist strip, a short distance from the beach. They took her into one of the large shops that sold dresses, bathers and shoes to tourists, and they bought her some modest black bathers, a one piece, with bright blue flowers and a matching dress and thongs. They bought her a large beach bag into which she put her old clothes and her own Hello Kitty backpack.

‘This is great’, said Khwan. ‘Now I look like you two! Glamorous big-city girls, working in a fancy restaurant, living it up!’

‘No’, said Salisa. ‘You look like a brilliant student who will one day have a university degree, turning heads with her elegance, brains and beauty.’

‘Oh, okay’, said Khwan, still smiling.

They spent the day at the beach, where Mali and Salisa bought Khwan soft drinks and ice cream until she felt sick and talked with her about her studies and what it was like to live in the ‘big city’ of Bangkok and on the island of Phuket. The beach astounded Khwan. When her bus to Phuket had driven over the causeway that

connected the island to the mainland, it was the first time she had seen the ocean, she told Mali. She talked to Mali a mile a minute, asking questions about every detail of their lives, and Mali smiled and tried to keep up; it was the first time she had had to deal with two girls from Salisa's family at once and she was as overwhelmed as she was pleased. Sometimes *farang* would come by and gawk at the three of them, and Salisa would glare at them until they moved on.

'I'm getting tired', Salisa said. 'Where would you like to see next?'

'I want to see where you work', Khwan chirped. Salisa looked at Mali.

'It sounds fine', said Mali, gently.

'I don't want her to get too excited by where we work', said Salisa.

'Sometimes young people find it a little too exciting.'

'She's just curious', said Mali. 'And maybe it's better for her to see.'

'Maybe it's better for her to see, and not to know everything about where we work', Salisa said quietly in Mali's ear. But Khwan overhead.

'But I *want* to know everything', said Khwan. 'Why won't you tell me everything? What aren't you telling me?'

Salisa groaned. 'If you don't ask me any questions for the whole rest of the day, I'll take you to where I work, in Patong', she said, and Khwan immediately closed her mouth.

They went to the Spicy Mango, even though they were worried that *mamasan* would be angry to see them there. But *mamasan* didn't seem interested in them at all, which spared Salisa the worry of introducing her to Khwan—*mamasan* wasn't Ma, and probably wouldn't tell Khwan the same fantastic, seductive lies Ma had told Salisa once, but all *mamasans* liked to seem nicer than they really were to very young girls who didn't yet work for them. *Mamasan* only gave them a wave and a

disinterested, polite smile when they first entered, and then didn't seem to notice them again for the rest of the evening. Salisa's friends from the bar, although they all wanted to come by to chat with Salisa and Mali about where they'd been, certainly noticed Khwan and were careful about what they said in front of her. There were times when Salisa truly loved her co-workers, she thought.

The three of them sat on stools at a high table at the front of the bar so Khwan could see the street. But to Salisa's dismay, her sister was far less interested in what was happening on the street and far too interested in what was happening inside the bar. Her eyes bulged at the tiny white bikinis the women in the bar were wearing, and then her eyes seemed like they would pop out of her head the first time she noticed a man groping a woman, pulling at the strings of her tie-on bikini top.

They drank sugary, brightly coloured non-alcoholic cocktails made just for them (no non-alcoholic drinks were usually served, except lady drinks) and played with the umbrellas and plastic swivel sticks. After they had been chatting for a while, Khwan finally turned her attention outside. Bangla Road was clearly the busiest street she had ever seen in her life. At night, it was closed off to traffic and what seemed like thousands of people swarmed up and down the road, going in and out of the bars. It looked like a market, crowded with street vendors, stalls and food carts. All of the bars along both sides of the road were dressed with flashing coloured lights.

'What is it like to work here?' Khwan asked. 'It must be so glamorous. You get to wear pretty clothes and have a party every night.' Salisa looked at her sister; Khwan smiled back at her. 'Khwan', Salisa said. 'How old are you?'

'Thirteen', said Khwan. 'You know that, sister.'

‘I was only three years older than you when I started this line of work’, said Salisa. ‘Did you realise that?’

‘Of course’, said Khwan. ‘And maybe in three years, I can join you here. We could live together and have parties and make lots of money doing it. Wouldn’t that be wonderful?’

Mali looked in her glass. Salisa looked her sister in the eyes. ‘Khwan’, said Salisa. ‘Do you know what sex is?’

Khwan blushed a little and looked down. ‘Of course’, she said. ‘They taught us in school.’

‘They teach you almost nothing in school’, said Salisa. ‘Do you really know what it is?’

‘A little’, said Khwan, quietly. ‘In the schoolyard they talk about it sometimes. Different things that ... that men and women do. It’s stupid.’

‘Khwan’, said Salisa. ‘Listen carefully.’ She bit her lip, hard. ‘That’s my job here. I have sex.’

Khwan looked up at her sister. Mali looked back and forth between the two of them, nervously. ‘I don’t understand’, said Khwan. ‘How is that your job?’

‘I’m a bargirl. I have sex for money’, Salisa said. ‘Mali, too. Men pay women to have sex with us, *farang* men.’

Khwan frowned, thinking. ‘The men want you to have babies?’ she asked. ‘That’s why they pay you?’

Salisa smiled at herself when her sister said this; she couldn’t help it. ‘They don’t want me to have babies, no’, she said. ‘They want to, I don’t know. They want to feel good. They want to have a girlfriend for a while.’

‘But sex feels bad’, said Khwan. ‘That’s what the girls at school tell me their sisters tell them.’

‘Those girls are stupid’, said Salisa. ‘And their sisters. It only feels bad for a while. Then it feels good. And it never feels bad for the men. That’s why they pay.’

They sat there, the three of them, Salisa fuming and not sure why, Mali quieter than she normally was, Khwan with her head resting in her cupped hands.

‘Do all men pay?’ Khwan asked, finally.

Salisa exhaled and was about to start to speak. ‘No’, said Mali. ‘Men want to find women they don’t have to pay.’ Salisa looked at her friend. ‘Sex between a man and a woman is different, normally’, Mali said. ‘Adults have sex with each other normally only when they love each other, and when it is a special experience for the two of them. Some men don’t have anyone they love that they can have sex with. So they pay. But all the time, they want to find someone they can love.’ Mali was looking at the table as she spoke; her voice was as calm as it always was. Salisa remembered, for a moment, how Mali’s face had looked when she saw Bill looking at the waitress in the restaurant, how it had looked when they had gone to the department store and she had bought new clothes, trying to look like someone a man might love. She thought of Mali disappearing for weeks without a word and she thought about how she had never really paid attention to this side of her friend.

‘But if you don’t have anyone to love’, Khwan said, ‘and your family needs money, and the men need someone to have sex with, then it’s okay.’

‘It’s not okay’, Salisa said, louder than she meant to. ‘This is a job you do only if you can’t do another job. If you have no choice. This is not a job you will ever do.’ Khwan was staring at her. ‘You are going to finish school’, she continued, ‘because you are a very smart girl. And you are going to keep learning English, and

go to university. You can study anything you want, and have any job you want. You could be a doctor, a teacher, a businesswoman. You could be a hotel manager.'

'Excuse me', said Mali, flushing. 'I need to talk to someone for a moment.'

'No, stay', said Salisa.

'No', said Mali, and she looked into Salisa's eyes. 'The two of you should be alone.' She stood up and walked across the bar before Salisa could stop her.

Now it was just Salisa and her sister. Khwan was staring at the table, her brow furrowed. Salisa wondered why she wanted Mali to be back here, just at this moment. She wondered why she suddenly found it hard to think of what to say. 'A hotel manager is a *very* glamorous and important job', she said quickly. 'You could be in charge of a beautiful five-star resort, and look after very important clients from all over the world. You could work in the most beautiful places. There are many fancy hotels on Phuket.'

Khwan sat there with her head in her hands.

'Don't you think that sounds like a good idea?' Salisa asked.

'How long have you worked as a—a bargirl?' asked Khwan. 'Have you done this work—the whole time?'

'Not the whole time', said Salisa. 'Nearly the whole time.' The sisters sat in silence. 'Wait here', said Salisa. 'I'm going to get you another drink. And find Mali. What do you want to drink?'

'I'm not thirsty, thank you', said Khwan, not looking at her.

'I'll get you a drink', said Salisa. 'Wait here.' She left the table, Khwan still with her head in her hands, her eyes staring at nothing.

Mali was standing with their roommates, Jum and Joy, on the other side of the bar. ‘You’re really going to get married in Australia?’ Jum was asking. ‘What are weddings like there?’

‘I’ll find out, won’t I’, Mali said. She spoke neutrally, like she usually did; only Salisa could tell how happy she actually was at this thing she was basically making up in her head. Now wasn’t the time to correct her.

‘Mali’, said Salisa. ‘Can you come back, please?’

‘Don’t take her’, laughed Joy. ‘We haven’t seen her for weeks. You see her all the time.’

‘Look who it is’, said Mali. ‘Should I send them a wedding invitation?’

Salisa turned. The two guys that had taken Salisa and Mali back to their hotel in Phuket Town the night before Mali had met Bill came into the bar and walked directly towards them. But worse: behind them in the doorway was a young guy in board shorts and a tank top. He scanned the bar expertly, then smiled and sat down next to Khwan. ‘Shit!’ said Salisa. ‘She’s only been there for thirty seconds!’

‘Who?’ asked Jum, but Salisa didn’t hear her. She stepped forward to go back to Khwan, but one of the guys caught her in an embrace.

‘Salisa!’ he said, making a clumsy *wai*. ‘Where have you been all my life? Or these past few weeks?’ His friend chuckled and grabbed Mali, who put on her business smile and let herself be hugged.

Salisa tried to get free. ‘Welcome’, she said. ‘Could you please excuse me for a moment?’ Two of their friends trailed in behind them, and came over to join them, forming a small crowd.

‘Absolutely not’, smiled the *farang*. ‘You’ve been hiding from me, baby! That’s a terrible thing to do.’



‘I really must be excused’, Salisa smiled, and the man had apparently learnt enough about her during their night at the hotel to let her go. Mali made her own excuse as Salisa pushed through the men surrounding them and worked her way to the front of the bar. Khwan was no longer at her table. Salisa could see she wasn’t anywhere in the bar, and she bolted for the street.

She froze, not knowing which way to run. Mali was behind her in a second.

‘Where’s Khwan?’ she asked.

‘Guy sat down next to her. Lost sight of her for a second and she disappeared.’

Panic shot through her like a cold bolt of lightning. She was out of breath from the fear, despite only having run a few steps. She whipped her head from side to side and scanned the crowds to her left and right, on both sides of the street. She looked for a girl in a black dress with blue flowers. She looked for a man in black and green board shorts and a tank top. She couldn’t remember what the tank top looked like. She didn’t even remember really looking at his face. She had only seen him for a second. He looked young; that was all she knew.

‘You go that way’, she said to Mali, pointing towards the beach.

‘Wait’, said Mali. ‘Think about this intelligently.’

But Salisa had already stepped out of her thongs, and was running up the street in her bare feet. She dodged everyone she could and even pushed a couple of people out of the way. She yelled, ‘Look out!’ in English as she went, running as fast as she could and yelling Khwan’s name.

*That man has taken her, she thought. He must have been looking for a virgin. It is obvious that she is a child. Did he think she was working in the bar? Khwan couldn’t have gone with him willingly, not after what I just told her, could she? Her*

thoughts ran ahead of her. *Or was she rebelling against me? So quickly? Did she want to see what it was like? I shouldn't have told her anything about my job! A young girl like Khwan shouldn't know anything about what I do.*

The Spicy Mango was located about halfway along Bangla Road. Salisa reached the end of the road in what felt like seconds. Khwan had left the bar only seconds before her. There is no way they could have gotten this far ahead. Standing at the intersection, where Bangla Road met Rat-U-Thit Road, she looked left and right. Miraculously, Rat-U-Thit Road wasn't as crowded for the moment and she could see up and down it fairly clearly on both sides. She couldn't see Khwan.

She ran back the way she came, slower this time, looking inside the bars and shops. She thought maybe they had gone inside one of them. She couldn't bring herself to even consider the other alternative, that they had gotten into a taxi or a *tuk-tuk* already and were long gone. She reached the bar again and kept going, in the direction she had told Mali to run. She stopped only to duck her head into the Spicy Mango and yell: 'Someone has taken my sister!'

She had no idea whether anyone would care. But as she ran off down the street, half of the staff in the bar poured out onto Bangla and spread out to look for her. Salisa started crying as she ran.

It had been about five minutes, maybe a few more. Salisa had reached the other end of the street and was bent over, her hands on her knees, breathing heavily. Her phone rang. It was Mali. 'Where is she? Have you found her?' she yelled.

'Starbucks. The big one on Thaweewong Road. She's inside.'

'Go get her!' Salisa commanded.

'I'm already inside', Mali said. 'She looks okay. Come here, quickly.'

Salisa bolted down the road that ran parallel to the beach to reach the Starbucks. By the time Salisa arrived, Mali was already sitting down inside with her arm around Khwan. The *farang* was standing up beside them. Mali had a crazy look on her normally peaceful face and was yelling at him. His arms were out in front of him with his palms up, as if the police had just stopped him. His face flushed red, he was still in the middle of a long apology, which he had been giving over top of Mali's yelling the whole time. Khwan was sucking slowly on a thick black straw, drawing up some kind of fancy chocolate drink with a thick mountain of cream on top.

'What the fuck?' were Salisa's first words, in English, directed at the *farang*.

'It's okay', he said, turning; he was young, about Salisa's age. 'It's okay. I thought she had been kidnapped.'

'Yes, *you* kidnapped her!' Salisa accused in a screeching voice. The staff behind the counter had become very quiet and were staring; she ignored them.

'No, I didn't', said the young man quickly. 'I was trying to help her. I thought she had been kidnapped and, you know, sold to the bar to be a sex worker.'

'She is *thirteen*', Mali said. Salisa stared at him, her brain burning.

'It happens', the young *farang* said. 'To children even younger than thirteen.' He looked back at Salisa. 'Her English isn't very good. But I asked where she is from, and she said a village outside Chiang Mai. She told me she is thirteen. I asked her what she was doing in the bar, and she told me that the women were paid to have sex with the men. I thought she meant *she* was paid to have sex with the men. But your friend here said she was just there with you. In a bar for sex workers. On ... on *holiday*?' He said holiday like it was a question and an accusation at the same time.

‘Yes, on holiday!’ Salisa shouted. ‘She is visiting me on her holiday! I wanted to show her where I worked!’ She heard how ridiculous it sounded.

‘She shouldn’t have been in the bar’, said the young *farang* quietly. ‘She is too young. I didn’t think she would be there with her *sister*.’

Salisa’s brain was still burning, but not all from anger, now. ‘Where were you taking her?’ she asked, looking the boy up and down a few times and beginning to listen to him properly.

He produced a worn out piece of wrinkled cardboard, a business card. It said ‘Action against Prostitution and Trafficking in Thailand (AAPTT)’. Underneath was an address in Bangkok and phone numbers. Salisa took it from him, read it, then put it in her pocket.

‘My name is Justin’, he said. ‘I’m a volunteer with AAPTT, from America. We help everyone we can, but mainly we try to help children who have been sold to brothels. We get them out.’

‘My sister wasn’t in a brothel, she was in a bar’, said Salisa. She tried to be polite; it was rare that she talked to *farang* who weren’t her customers, except Dave. ‘There is a difference.’

‘I know, I know. I’m sorry. I’m not even in Phuket with AAPTT. I’m just taking a break and seeing a bit of Thailand. I just went into the bar for a drink, but when I saw your sister, I thought she was in trouble. I didn’t know it was a go-go bar when I went in; I thought it was a normal bar. Otherwise I would never have been in there.’

‘Why wouldn’t you have gone in there?’ Khwan spoke up for the first time, having half-finished her drink, placing it on the low coffee table in front of her.

‘Because it’s not right’, said Justin, hotly. ‘It’s degrading, what the women wear, and having to dance half-naked for men. Not to mention the prostitution. It’s unacceptable. I know it’s everywhere in Thailand, but I try to only frequent places where there are no prostitutes, when I’m not volunteering.’

Salisa frowned, hard. Mali had gotten very quiet, her eyes narrow.

‘My sister works there’, Khwan said. ‘I told you that.’

Justin got very pale, suddenly mortified. ‘I’m sorry’, he said quickly. ‘I have nothing against the women who are prostitutes themselves. I just don’t think any woman should have to sell her body.’

‘I see’, said Mali, icily.

‘I’m like a pacifist who is against the war, but still supports the troops’, said Justin weakly. ‘It’s not their fault, you know.’

‘Okay’, said Salisa. ‘Okay. You weren’t trying to hurt my sister, you were trying to help. You were just misguided. And you jumped to conclusions. And you really, really scared us.’

Two women from the Spicy Mango in tight skirts and high heels ran past the window. One of them saw the group inside Starbucks out of the corner of her eye and stopped, smiled. She pulled her mobile phone out of her bag to call the other girls who were still out looking. Salisa smiled at her, waved, and mouthed ‘*korb jai*’ through the window. Thank you.

‘Do you accept coffee from women who sell their bodies?’ Mali asked.

Justin looked confused a moment, then shook his head. ‘No, no thank you, it’s fine’, he said. ‘I can get coffee for everyone.’

‘I know you can’, said Mali. ‘I can too.’ She put on her sweet smile, then stood up and went to the counter. She was saying something to the staff there, who

seemed relieved. Salisa wondered if they were relieved that she hadn't beaten up the *farang* in their store.

Justin sat down beside Khwan. Salisa had now turned her attention to her sister and was talking to her rapidly in Thai, giving Justin a breather. 'Why on earth did you leave the bar with this man? What were you thinking?' Salisa asked.

'I don't know', said Khwan; she seemed shell-shocked. 'He said it was dangerous for me to be in the bar and that he could help me. He seemed really worried about me and he seemed nice.'

'You cannot trust people like that! He could have hurt you. You can't go off with strange men, *ever*.'

'You go off with strange men every night', said Khwan.

'That's different!' snapped Salisa.

'You left me by myself', said Khwan, and Salisa suddenly realised her sister was crying. 'I—I was scared what would happen to me. After you told me what all those men were doing in the bar. But he said I would be safe with him.'

Salisa felt the corners of her eyes burning. She put her arm around her sister. Justin sat with his hands in his lap, unsure of what they were saying, unsure of where he should look. 'I can protect myself', Salisa said. 'I'm strong. I know when I'm in danger and I know who I can trust. I had to learn these skills. You won't have to.'

Khwan sniffled but said nothing. Mali returned with the drinks in a small cardboard tray and passed them out. Justin didn't take his, just stared at his hands. 'Thank you', he said to Mali.

'No, thank you', said Salisa, turning to Justin. 'You're right that she shouldn't have been in the bar. But next time, please make sure that someone is

really in trouble before you try to help them. All of the girls that I have ever known to be in a bar have been there by choice. A bar is not a brothel. It's not the same.'

'If you say so', said Justin quietly.

'It's not the same', stressed Salisa.

'If you say so', he repeated, a bit snarkily. And then, in a softer voice, 'I'm really sorry. Can I give you my email address? And my number? If you ever need any help with anything, you can contact me if you ever decide you don't want to work in the bar anymore. In Bangkok, we have classes to teach women new skills so they can get other jobs. Maybe you might be interested?'

'Perhaps I'll think about it', said Salisa. 'I already have your card.'

They took their drinks with them and left Justin behind. Through the window, Salisa watched Justin sit with the drink Mali had bought him, still untouched. He was the first *farang* she'd ever met who didn't pay to sleep with women, aside from Christian. And Dave, kind of. He was young, the same age as her. Khwan fell asleep on the taxi ride home. Salisa held her protectively, and firmly, still a little angry with her for being so naïve. She thought Khwan should have known better. But she also saw now that she, Salisa, should have known better than to take her to the bar in the first place, no matter how exciting a place it was. After all, it really *was* a brothel, just like Justin said.

'She's so wilful', said Salisa. 'She told me I went off with strange men every night, so it was no problem for her to go off with one and scare me half to death. Where does she get such wilfulness?'

'It's a real mystery', Mali said, looking at her friend with raised eyebrows.

The next day, Salisa bought Khwan a pre-paid mobile phone with a 12Call SIM card. She programmed her number in the number one spot for speed dial, and

put Mali's in as number two. '*Always* keep your phone with you so I can call you at any time, and you can call me. Don't lose it.' Khwan promised, and stuffed it in her pocket, still looking embarrassed about the previous night.

For the rest of their holiday, they stayed away from Patong and did fun, touristy things with Khwan, things that a child would enjoy doing. They decided to stop thinking of her as all grown up.

Mali told Bill her own special version of events, which fit with the fantasy world she had created especially for him. In Mali's version, Khwan was *her* sister who was visiting from Isaan, not Salisa's. The more family members Mali had, the more money she needed to support them. Though this was the first time she had mentioned a sister, Mali now confirmed for Bill that she did indeed have a younger sister in addition to her two younger brothers. Khwan travelled down to Phuket so she could have a short holiday with her. Although in this fantasy world it had only been several weeks since Khwan had seen Mali, she missed her terribly. Also, there wasn't likely to be another chance for Khwan to have a holiday with Mali and her sister's best friend Salisa in Phuket in quite some time. If Mali didn't find a husband, and soon, then after she returned to the farm it could be a few years before they could afford another holiday away, since there was no one else to run the farm until the boys were old enough.

By the end of her phone conversation, Bill had offered to deposit some money into Salisa's bank account for the three of them to use on their holiday, so they would have a nicer time. He didn't want Mali deciding to go home to Isaan before he returned from Bangkok, he said. He was eager to see her again.



‘Why do you trust me with this money?’ Salisa asked, joking. ‘How do you know I won’t run off with it and start my own bar and hire lots of bargirls to make me rich and powerful?’

‘I trust you with this money because Bill can’t know I have a bank account that I opened in Bangkok’, said Mali simply. ‘He doesn’t think I’ve ever been there.’

‘How do you keep all of this straight in your head?’ Salisa asked. ‘If you get married, you’ll have to keep up this ridiculous story forever.’

‘Once we’re married, we’ll begin to write our own story’, Mali said. ‘Then it won’t be so important to have to remember the details of this one.’

‘I can’t tell if you’re very smart or very stupid’, Salisa said.

‘I can’, smiled Mali.

Salisa didn’t even remember when she, like Mali, had started tacitly assuming that Mali and Bill were invariably going to get married.

The additional money Bill gave them certainly allowed them to have a wonderful holiday. They felt like their rich *farang* customers, free to do as they pleased in beautiful Phuket. They took Khwan to all sorts of fun places that they themselves had never been. They went to Phuket Zoo, elephant riding, to see a magic show, and to the movies. They went shopping, and they spent time swimming at the beach and lying in the shade. They even went on a speedboat tour to Phi Phi island, stopping at Maya Beach where the film *The Beach* was made, or so they were told—none of them had seen it. The boat left Mali and Khwan feeling very sick.

They even went to Fantasea, the cultural theme park and elaborate stage show, though it was more expensive than anything else they did put together. The show was the most amazing and beautiful thing they had ever seen. As they rested their heads on the backs of their seats marvelling at the gymnasts suspended above,

as if dancing in mid-air against a starry night, Salisa let herself forget who she was and what her life was really like, and became lost in the beauty surrounding her.

Being awake and out during the day and asleep at night had a profound effect on Salisa. It made her feel like a normal person, or what she imagined a normal person might feel like, anyway. She enjoyed not working immensely. It was the first time she had ever felt this way, with the exception of the two weeks she had spent with Dave in Bangkok, and even then, she was technically working. Now she could do as she pleased. She loved being with her sister and Mali, and feeling more in control of her days. She knew exactly where and when she would be going to sleep every night of those two weeks.

For the first time, she started to really consider her life and allow herself to acknowledge how badly she wished it were different. She was beginning to understand why Mali was so desperate to marry a man who could afford to take care of her, so she would never have to work in the bars again.

On the day Khwan left, Salisa cried in the bathroom so her sister and Mali wouldn't see her. Then she dried her eyes and came out. Khwan was dressed as a farmer's daughter again, the same way she had come to Phuket. 'Stay in school', Salisa said. 'Don't be like your sister.' She wanted, on some level, for Khwan to protest. *But I love you*, Khwan would say. *I want to do what you do. I want to be just like you.*

Instead, Khwan just nodded. 'I won't', she said. 'Will you write to me soon? I'm going to write to you.'

'Every day', said Salisa. 'I'll write in English from now on. Then you can practice your English more.'

‘Then I’ll get better at it than you’, smiled Khwan. And so she went back to the village, and Salisa went back to work.

At first, they wrote each other every day. Then it became every week, then once or twice a month, as it had been before Khwan’s visit. But the letters never stopped coming.

## Chapter Fourteen

The one good thing about Bill in Salisa's view was the scooter he'd given Mali. They used it for everything, even when it wasn't strictly necessary. Salisa was a fan of driving, and Mali had no problem letting her friend drive and playing the role of navigator—Salisa was always getting lost, she said.

They were on the scooter one afternoon returning from the market, their shopping bags in the basket on the front of the scooter, overflowing a bit; Salisa wasn't driving very fast to make sure they stayed upright.

'I'd love to buy Khwan a scooter', she yelled back over the traffic.

'Maybe you can give her this one', Mali yelled back. 'When I go to Australia, I won't need this. You can take it up to the village and surprise her.'

'We'll both surprise her. We'll do it before you get married. We'll take a week off work and head up there. She'll love it!'

'I don't work anymore. Not at a bar at least.'

'I forget these things.'

Salisa went to turn right off a main road to go home. There were two lanes of traffic that both appeared to have stopped for a traffic light that was up ahead. A minivan full of tourists had halted in the lane nearest to them, so Salisa couldn't see what was behind it. She turned right in front of the minivan but as soon as they were past it, she saw that the other lane hadn't stopped. A small jeep was coming towards them slowly and in an instant, the scooter had tipped over, and they were on the ground beside it.

Salisa jumped up as soon as she hit the ground and turned to Mali to see if she was okay. She was still on the ground, confused. She sat up and looked at her palms. Her right palm was grazed and bleeding, little rocks from the asphalt stuck in the wound. Her right leg was grazed all down the side, from her knee to her ankle. She looked up at Salisa, a little shaken. Seeing that she wasn't very badly hurt, Salisa pulled her up and took her to the side of the road. Looking at her own body for the first time, she saw she had matching injuries on her right hand and leg.

People from the shops on the side of the road had run out to help them. A young Thai man brought their scooter from the road to where they were standing, looking at each other, a little stunned.

A white man and woman had jumped out of the jeep, leaving it in the middle of the road, and looked petrified. They were older, silver in their hair and loud shirts and khaki shorts on: they looked like tourists who'd rented a car for their first big post-retirement vacation. The man was staring at Salisa and Mali, saying, 'Are you all right? I'm so sorry', over and over until the woman he was with told him in a low voice to keep quiet. She was looking a little less scared than he was, and was obviously trying to assess the situation, looking at everyone who had gathered around them. Everyone was speaking Thai except the couple from the jeep, and no one was talking to them.

The woman, seeing this, pointed to a spot about fifteen metres down the road. 'Pull the jeep over to the side of the road', she said. 'Park there.'

'I'm sorry', he said. 'I'm so sorry.'

'Calm down', the woman ordered. 'It isn't your fault. It's okay.' Salisa knew she was right; she had driven right out in front of them.

By the time he had parked the jeep and walked back, an ambulance had arrived from nowhere. Salisa didn't know who had called it, nor did she think one was necessary. The man from the ambulance, dressed in a white uniform with green stripes, addressed her sternly. 'You have to come to the hospital and be checked over. You have been in a very serious accident and you will need tests. We need to be sure you don't have a concussion or other neck or spinal injuries.'

'We're fine', Salisa said. 'Just grazed a little. If we had spinal injuries, would we be standing up?'

'Don't worry about the cost', said the ambulance driver. 'The *farang* will pay for all your medical bills. We will ensure they receive a large bill, don't worry. We will also, ah, compensate you for your time.'

'What?' For a second, Salisa wasn't sure what he was talking about. The other uniformed man who had only just gotten off his mobile phone came over and put it more bluntly. 'We will run many tests and give the *farang* a big bill. We will give you your cut.'

'Haven't you ever been in an accident like this before?' asked the first driver. 'We always do this. Legally, it is the obligation of the *farang* to pay.'

Salisa looked over at the older *farang* couple again. Still no one had spoken to them and they seemed very unsure of what to do. They kept looking up and down the road, and looked to Salisa like they just wanted to leave. Finally, the first ambulance officer addressed them. 'You are responsible for the medical bills and the repairs to the bike.' The Western couple and Salisa all looked over to the bike at the same time. There wasn't a scratch on it.

'But the accident wasn't our fault', the woman said in an Australian accent. 'They drove out in front of us. We were driving slowly, but we still didn't have time

to stop. We had right of way. We couldn't even see them, they came out from behind a van. It wasn't our fault at all!

'According to Thai law, if you don't have a Thai driving license, the accident is your fault', said the driver. 'You are financially responsible.'

'What?' the woman asked. She turned to her husband and opened her mouth, but didn't say anything. Salisa didn't know for certain, but she was pretty sure that the law was different in Australia. 'I'm sorry', the man repeated, voice suddenly hollow.

Mali came up behind Salisa. 'Are you all right?' she asked quietly. Her hand had already stopped bleeding.

'Yes', said Salisa. 'This is ridiculous. Let's go.' Without saying anything to any of the people crowded around them, Salisa directed Mali to the bike and they both hopped on and drove off down the road, leaving a group of stunned Thai people and two frightened Westerners behind.

'What about them? Those *farang*?' Mali yelled into Salisa's ear. 'What will they do to them?'

'They can't do anything now that we have left. We are the only ones that can make them pay for anything or get the police involved. They can just leave now.' Salisa hoped she was right.

Salisa drove to a small doctor's surgery close to their house and the nurse cleaned both their wounds and bandaged them. 'These are very superficial wounds', she assured them. 'Not very deep. You will be fine. You won't even have a scar.'

Mali did end up with a faint scar down the side of her leg, but Salisa's skin healed over like it had never happened.

‘Bill is coming back from Bangkok tomorrow’, Mali said one day when all four roommates were in the apartment, mid-afternoon. ‘Do you want to meet him?’

‘I’m not sure I should’, said Salisa. ‘I’m just a dirty bargirl. I’ll be a real third wheel. I’ll get in the way of your true love.’

‘It’s not true that you’re just a dirty bargirl’, said Mali, stiffly. ‘I talk about you all the time with Bill. I tell him you’re my best friend. He wants to meet you. He wants to know more about my friends.’ Salisa put down the magazine she was reading.

‘Really?’ she asked.

‘Really and truly’, said Mali. ‘Will you meet him?’

‘Yes’, said Salisa. ‘Yes, why not.’

‘Can Joy and I meet him?’ asked Jum, stepping into her pointy high heels for work.

‘No’, said Mali. ‘You may not.’

True, Mali had said that Salisa was her best friend, and not just some bargirl. Despite that, Salisa noticed that Mali was going to some fairly extreme lengths to make it clear to Bill that her friend was not a bargirl. ‘You are a student!’ she said, more agitated than Salisa had ever seen her. ‘A student is intelligent and modest. You can’t wear such a short skirt, and your top shouldn’t have glitter on it!’

‘Don’t be horrible’, snapped Salisa. ‘This is my nicest outfit!’

‘Put this one on’, said Mali, handing her a bag from Robinson. ‘This one is nicer.’



It was nicer, a semi-formal long dress and a pair of strappy sandals. She changed, then came out and twirled in a genteel way. 'Is this student-like enough for you and your dream husband?' she asked.

'The very soul of decorum', Mali said. 'Let's go. We'll only be half an hour late if we go now.'

'If you hadn't made me change we'd have been there by now', Salisa said under her breath. 'What's that?' asked Mali. Salisa didn't want to argue, so she didn't repeat herself. They went outside to Mali's pink scooter. Salisa sat in front, ready to drive, but Mali shook her head.

'No', she said. 'I'm driving.'

'Come on', said Salisa. 'I'm still the better driver.'

'As very arguably true as that may be', said Mali, 'tonight I will be driving.' Again, Salisa let it go. She moved backwards and let Mali sit down in front. Mali drove extra carefully to where they were meeting Bill, the Sand Bar Club, a part of one of the fancy resorts along Patak West Road, which ran parallel to Karon beach.

Bill was already there waiting for them, and he didn't seem at all perturbed that they were late. Mali spotted him at an outside table and waved to him extravagantly. 'So much enthusiasm', said Salisa. 'Someone missed her dream man.'

'Not one more word about that', said Mali, a huge smile plastered across her face.

Bill stood to greet them as they walked across the sand to the table he had chosen, one with two large wooden chairs on one side and a giant wooden swing on the other. He kissed Mali on the cheek and nodded and smiled at Salisa, not returning her *wai*. 'The famous Salisa', he said. 'It's wonderful to meet you at last.'

Before speaking, Salisa waited for him to return the *wai*. After a few long moments, staring at him in the soft light of the candles from the surrounding tables, she realised that he wasn't going to, which was shocking. Mali smiled and didn't seem to notice. 'It's wonderful to meet you, too', Salisa said finally, the way she thought a student might say it. 'Mali tells me so much about you.'

'All of it good, I hope', he said.

'Of course', said Salisa. 'She says you have a great generosity of spirit.'

Mali shot her a look, and of course, she had said it to needle her friend, figuring it would pass right over Bill's head. But when she looked at him, she realised that in fact it hadn't passed over his head; he looked her in the eyes and nodded and smiled. The most upsetting thing, she realised, was that Bill didn't seem upset at all by the implication. He took Mali's two small hands in his own, drew them to his mouth, and kissed her fingers. Mali giggled what Salisa knew was a fake, for-customers kind of giggle. Salisa felt a twinge in her stomach.

'I'm starving', she said. 'Let's go ahead and order, shall we?'

'There's no hurry', laughed Bill, his eyes cold. 'We have all the time we need.'

They sat down, ordered and began the meal. The women had salads, and Bill had a giant steak with seafood on top of it, the most disgusting meal Salisa had ever seen. She sat on the swing, opposite Bill and Mali. All night Salisa watched Bill's scrutinising eyes pass from her to Mali and back again, over and over. Though she thought Mali's cover story was ridiculous and unbelievable, still she worried every time she spoke that Bill would figure it out. But he never said anything. He made only a few polite comments to Salisa and asked her few questions. He treated her

almost like an afterthought, like talking to Mali's friend was on par with waiting in line for a driver's license: a necessary formality before he could get on the road.

He spent most of his time focusing on Mali herself. He stared at Mali like he wanted to eat her. Salisa looked around the restaurant and saw several other similar couples made up of old, wrinkly white men and young, smooth Thai women. Salisa had seen this situation before—she had been in similar situations before—but it had never been quite like this. She found it harder to eat than she should have, given how good the meal was compared to the food she ate from food carts most days at her job. It was obvious to her that Mali had no genuine affection for Bill. She could tell by the inflection in her voice, her body language, the things she spoke to him about, and the way she waited on him like he was a small child.

Bill spoke in detail about his business dealings in Bangkok and the decisions that he and his partners had made about the resort they were building in Phuket, in the hills above Kata beach. He spoke only in English at all times, not a word of Thai. Even the most unintelligent of *farang* that Salisa had met at least had the courtesy to say things like 'hello' and 'thank you' in Thai. Mali feigned interest and knowledge so effectively that Salisa thought Mali could have pulled off pretending to be a university student better than the story she chose about running a farm. It would certainly better explain how well she spoke English. Perhaps Bill didn't have any conception of what it was really like to live in a small village in Isaan. Perhaps he didn't know how few of the young women who never left there, particularly of her generation and earlier, finished their education or learnt to speak English. In fact, it seemed to Salisa that Bill was fairly ignorant of many aspects of Thailand and Thai culture. Either that, or he just chose to ignore them.

For much of the dinner, then, she was perfectly happy to fake smiles and let Bill do the talking for everyone. After the plates had been cleared—and after some drinks; normally she was smart enough not to drink with customers, but she had done Mali the dubious honour of not treating Bill as a customer and accepted his offer of a bottle of wine, which Mali, her work instincts still obviously about her, had declined—he was still talking about some investment deal he had just finished with, one that involved a complicated act of revenge against one of his former business partners who had in some arcane way wronged him. Sometimes he would make some gesture towards discussing Mali or a topic that might interest her, but Mali smiled and deftly steered the conversation back to him, which he seemed to appreciate. Salisa didn't appreciate it, and the wine was going to her head. She got sick of hearing him speak.

'That is amazing', she said, interrupting. 'It's just like the men at my university. All so knowledgeable, and with so many great accomplishments, and so willing to discuss them!' She was happy to be sitting some distance away on the swing when she looked at Mali's face and saw that Mali wanted very badly to kick her.

Bill smiled wider and leaned over the table. 'Why don't you tell me some more about your university', he said. 'Hotel management is such an interesting industry. I'm curious about what they teach you here, and how they teach it.'

She cursed herself silently and tried to think back to different things her customers had told her about their university experiences. 'It's the usual', she laughed. 'Classes are the same everywhere. And the end of year break is too long, I think. The school year is so short. You know?' She didn't actually have any Thai friends who had been to university, and worried as soon as she'd said it that this

information was probably completely wrong. But Bill nodded and quickly turned his attention back to Mali, and so she realised that Bill had no idea about Thai universities either. She wondered what he did know about Thailand.

‘Thank you for a lovely evening’, she said, giving him her best work smile and an extravagant, inappropriate *wai*.

‘You’re very welcome’, he said, not looking at her. He smiled at Mali and held her hands. Salisa thought she could see him pass her an envelope. They talked about their plans; Bill seemed not to realise that Salisa would need a ride back to the apartment, and that Mali would need to get some of her things together in an overnight bag before going back to his hotel with him, but finally they made their arrangements. Mali would stay at the apartment that night. The next day, she would be with Bill, like it had been before.

They got on the scooter, and Mali gave another extravagant wave. Bill blew her a kiss, turned his back on the women, and went into the bar for the ‘night cap’ he’d said he’d get before retiring to his hotel.

‘How interesting that you decided to get drunk on a very important evening for me’, Mali shouted over the scooter’s engine as they headed back to the apartment. ‘I really appreciated that!’

‘Oh, hush’, Salisa shouted back. ‘It’s obviously fine. He can afford the expensive wine. And he doesn’t have to like me. He doesn’t even have to like you, it seems. He just has to want to devour you or something.’

‘He has to take care of me’, Mali yelled.

‘I think you can take care of yourself just fine’, Salisa said, but quietly enough that Mali wouldn’t hear her over the traffic.

## Chapter Fifteen

After Bill had been back in Phuket for a few weeks, Mali stopped going with him to his meetings. The longer they stayed together, the less time they actually spent together during the day. From the way Mali described it to Salisa, it seemed that Bill was happy as long as he was saying goodbye to Mali in the morning (after she had prepared his breakfast in his hotel suite's kitchen—he had stopped ordering room service for breakfast or going down to the hotel restaurant for the buffet breakfast there) and coming home to her at night. She would accompany him to dinner, or sometimes make it for him if he was too tired to go out, if he hadn't already had dinner with his business partners, spend the evening with him, and sleep next to him at night.

‘I think it's a good sign that he wants me to make his breakfast’, Mali said. ‘It means that he's testing me out. He wants to see that I have what it takes to be his wife.’

‘Or his maid’, said Salisa.

‘He doesn't want a maid’, said Mali. ‘He wants a wife.’

*A slave wife*, thought Salisa.

Whatever Bill's problems, they left Mali free during the day to visit Salisa. She would ride her scooter back to their apartment as soon as Bill had left for work. Salisa was glad that at least Mali was coming to see her every day. It was much better than when she was gone for weeks, when Mali first met Bill. But they still weren't able to spend much time together. During the day, after long nights of work at the Spicy Mango, Salisa just wanted to sleep. Mali would clean up, make Salisa

breakfast, and sit on her old mattress reading books in English about Australia and a range of business and management books from the 'For Dummies' series, so she could improve both her English and her Bill-relevant knowledge. It was like she was studying for a big exam all the time.

Mali would wait for Salisa to wake up, or wake her up, earlier than Salisa would normally get up when working such late nights, and they would spend the afternoon together until it was time for Salisa to go to the Mango and for Mali to get back to Bill's hotel, where he thought she had been most of the day, happily doing nothing but waiting for him to come home. Though Bill knew Mali visited Salisa sometimes, he didn't seem to realise she wasn't happy to stay in the hotel all day most days, waiting for him to return.

Bill gave Mali money in an envelope at the end of every week. Once, forgetting herself, Mali laughed as she took it.

'Friday afternoon! It's as if I'm an employee at one of your hotels on payday', she said, smiling.

Bill didn't smile. 'Why did you say that?' he asked, angrily.

Mali got professional, dropped her smile and bowed her head a little. 'I'm sorry', she said. 'It was a little joke. It doesn't matter.'

'It wasn't very funny', said Bill. 'You're not some employee to me.'

'I apologise', Mali said. 'My English is maybe not the best. Maybe I said something wrong by accident, maybe the joke came out wrong.'

'Maybe', said Bill. He smiled a little, warily. 'Maybe it'd be better not to try joking like that in the future.'

She agreed, and she never joked about it again. But he kept paying her on Friday afternoons, always the same sum, and always in a little envelope. He paid

Mali because he didn't want her to return home to her farm, which meant he had to support Mali and her family. The money he gave her was more than she was earning in the bar, but not by much. Salisa wondered whether he knew what the going rate for bargirls in Phuket was.

It went on like this. Mali would come over. She would stay with Salisa for a few hours. Then she would gather up her 'For Dummies' books and Australia guides and put them in her bag while Salisa put on makeup and did her hair for work. Then Salisa would go to work, and Mali would go to Bill's hotel. Salisa would dance in the bar, sleep with strangers, listen to Jum and Joy snoring on the other side of the room, and wonder how long this would last for her. She wondered how long it would be before she might want to find someone like Bill herself. The thought always made her angry, which meant it might be a long time. She wondered whether that was good or bad for her.

Dave finally got to see where Salisa was living on Phuket when he visited in July 2007, for Salisa's twenty-first birthday. It wasn't a surprise this time and he stayed for four weeks, paying not just Salisa's bar fines but also compensating her for the money she lost from not seeing customers while she spent the month with him. Salisa hadn't wanted to take the money, but he insisted. Salisa couldn't afford to send enough money home that month without having sex with customers, and Dave knew that. She could never afford to stop having sex with the never-ending parade of *farang*.

He seemed so much older to Salisa now, so grown up. He was twenty-six, had built a four-bedroom house that he lived in alone, and had just started his own



business. He even planned to hire some apprentices of his own. He now spoke Thai, *fairly* well. He had started trying to learn on his own after his first trip to Bangkok, and after a year and a half of not getting anywhere, had studied it at TAFE for three years. His course had finished a year and a half ago now, but Salisa could tell he was still practicing, not just in his emails and phone calls to her. She couldn't understand why it was so important to him to learn it, especially since she spoke to him in English almost all of the time. He showed Salisa photos of his house, his new office, and even his suburb in earnest. Salisa had cooed over the photos and acted excited, but nothing she said seemed to be the reaction Dave was after.

When he left, he said 'At least now I can picture you here, in Phuket, when I think of you.' He wasn't smiling. 'I just wish I could picture you somewhere else, Sassy.'

Salisa held his hand and kissed him on the cheek. 'I'm okay. I'm happy here.' She tried to sound reassuring, but her voice was flat.

'You don't have to keep doing this', Dave said for the one millionth time. 'I can help.' Salisa refused his offer of help, for the one millionth time. Dave, apart from Mali, was the closest person to her in this world. She couldn't take anything from him because she thought it would cheapen what they had.

'You're so stubborn, Salisa.' He dropped her hands, but gave her a small smile. 'No, proud. You're too proud. And that both helps and hurts you.'

One day in May 2008, after almost three years in Phuket with Bill, Mali didn't come to see Salisa in the afternoon as she always did. There were no calls or messages, either. Salisa sat on the mattress with the phone beside her and waited for it to ring until it was time to get ready for work. This went on for three days before

she woke up to find Mali sitting next to her. She was smiling, really smiling, and her light skin looked like it was glowing.

After more than three years of planning and building, Bill's enormous five-star resort had finally opened; there had been a massive party. Mali had been invited and Bill had kept her on his arm the entire time, giving hearty handshakes to his business partners. During the first week after the resort's grand opening, he took Mali there for dinner in the restaurant and they stayed in one of its nicest ocean view villas for a night.

Despite how dependent on her Mali thought Bill had become, she had been worried that he had planned this evening so he could say goodbye. Mali had stayed with him almost the whole time he had been in Phuket and she had made every effort to present herself as wife material. But what if Salisa was right? What if he only wanted a companion during his time on Phuket? She knew that now that the resort was finished, there was no need for Bill to stay; he and his business partners had hired a management team and only had to wait for the massive profits to start rolling in. Now that his stay had ended, their relationship might end with it. But she had underestimated Bill's desire for a full time, ongoing caretaker like the one he had found in Mali. Sure, Mali was more expensive than actual domestic staff, but then he did get all the fringe benefits of having her sleep over. He had made his choice.

'He did it! I did it!' she beamed, holding her left hand so close to Salisa's face that she couldn't see the ring. 'We are getting married!'

Salisa's heart fell into her stomach, but she lifted the corners of her mouth anyway. 'Congratulations', she said, and she made herself give Mali a big smile, just as big and fake as the smiles Mali gave to Bill.

‘And we are moving to Koh Samui! Next month!’ Mali said.

‘You’re moving? To Samui?’ Salisa repeated. ‘Not to Australia?’

‘No, *we* are moving. You, too! You are coming, aren’t you?’ she asked, as if they had already had this discussion. ‘I don’t understand’, Salisa said.

‘Oh, eventually we’ll go to Australia’, Mali said. ‘But not yet. First, Bill is going to go to Samui to see about building another hotel. This one went so well and is going to make him so much money. And he says Samui is an even better investment. He says it is even more beautiful than Phuket! And less crowded! Smaller, nicer. He says it will be more like my village back home and that I will love living there. And you’ll be there, too, won’t you? So it’ll be wonderful.’

Salisa couldn’t see how an island that was nothing more than a giant tourist resort could be like where Mali came from in Isaan, but remembered Bill didn’t know anything about Mali’s village. She realised, heart sinking, that on some level Mali honestly hadn’t thought about the fact that one day, if she wanted to continue this charade, she would actually have to go to Australia and leave Salisa behind.

‘Mali—I can’t move to Samui’, she said. ‘You’ll be the only person I know there, and then you’ll leave. You’ll go to Australia with Bill.’

‘But not for months, maybe’, Mali said. ‘It took so long for him to build this resort in Phuket. And you could come back to Phuket afterwards, when we go to Australia, if you want.’

Her best friend in the world had gotten the one thing she wanted—an escape from the bars. Despite the disaster Salisa was sure she was walking into, Salisa wanted to be with her. ‘It’ll be impossible’, she said. ‘But I’ll ask *mamasan* what she knows about Samui.’ Mali beamed and threw her arms around Salisa’s neck. Salisa could feel the cold band of her ring.

They went together to the Mango right away because Mali was bursting to share her good news with as many people as she could. *Mamasan*, swept up in the excitement of Mali's good fortune, wasn't worried for the moment about Salisa leaving. 'I have a brother in Samui, he owns a bar there. I'm sure he will give you a job, Salisa.'

The other girls were crowded around Mali, oohing and aahing at the ring. It was their dream come true. If it could happen to someone like Mali, Salisa knew they were thinking, it could happen to me. 'You met Bill, right?' Jum asked Salisa. 'Does he have a brother maybe? Is that why you're moving to Samui?'

'No, Bill's an only child', Salisa said.

'What a shame!' Jum pouted.

'I know', Salisa said. 'If only there were a hundred thousand Bills in the world. Then there wouldn't be any problems anymore for anyone.'

The next month, on the last night in Phuket, Mali paid Salisa's bar fine for her last night of work at the Spicy Mango and they stayed in the bar all night together drinking, Mali to celebrate and Salisa to forget what was happening.

'Be my friend', Mali said at one point when they were both drunk. 'I escaped the bars. Be happy for me. Why aren't you happy for me?'

'There are other ways to escape the bars', Salisa said. 'There must be. You don't have to do this, you know.'

Mali sighed and poured the last of the whisky into Salisa's glass. 'If there are other ways to escape the bars', she said, 'then what are they?'

Salisa stared at the brown whisky, grabbed the glass and drank it all with one quick swallow.

## Chapter Sixteen

I've visited Thailand four times now. I thought I already had a pretty good idea about people's lives here and after the initial research I did this year before coming on this field trip. I even thought I wouldn't find out that much new about what it was like to be a bargirl. After being in Thailand again for six weeks, and listening to Salisa and Mali's story for four weeks now, I see that I know nothing. The more I speak to them, the more I find out I *don't know* about their lives. The more I find we *don't* have in common. And yet—I've had friends make bizarre, terrible relationship decisions that I've felt helpless to talk them out of. I've worried about losing my little brother at the beach. I've been in a car accident. I've felt lonely, sad, directionless. Caged. There are things we share.

I had thought before coming here that I might find women who wanted to help me because they could see that my research was on an important topic, and that this type of research is what can help women's rights advance, what can help us to maybe see the end of the problems that cause prostitution. I don't really know how Salisa and Mali see my research, but I don't get the sense that they are helping me because of the research itself. I feel more like they're helping me because of *me*. To help me. It just makes me love them more. I already think of them as my best friends. I wish they really were.

We are walking down the crowded street in Chaweng on our way to a late dinner when Salisa's mobile rings. She fishes for it in Mali's green handbag (they had swapped handbags a few weeks ago, for a change) and beams when she sees it is

Khwan calling. 'It's my sister, in Bangkok', she whispers as she flips it open and puts it to her ear.

'Oh, wonderful', I say. 'Would it be all right if I talked to her? I'd love the chance to talk to her.' But Salisa has stopped beaming.

'*Nee krai gum lung pood*', she asks: the Thai for 'Who is this?' She doesn't say anything else after that. She stops walking and listens for about ten minutes, without saying anything. Her face is expressionless at first, like she is in shock, but then it looks like a thunderstorm of anger and terror.

Mali keeps looking from Salisa to me, and then pushes her ear up to the phone and strains to hear. She hears enough. 'Khwan is in trouble. Missing. She is missing.'

Salisa begins to speak rapidly in Thai. Mali walks backwards a few paces and then sits down in the gutter, her head in her hands, and begins to cry. Salisa snaps her phone shut.

'What is it?' I ask. 'What's wrong?'

Her voice, when she speaks, is monotone. 'Khwan has been kidnapped.' She swallows, then makes herself continue. She seems frozen for a minute. I stare, waiting for her to speak, and notice that one of her butterfly hair clips is about to fall out. 'I told you she works at a hotel, as a receptionist. That was her friend Ting, another receptionist, calling me from Khwan's phone. She saw Khwan being taken. Khwan was on her break and she was standing in the street right outside the hotel. She was talking to a boy. A young boy. Her friend thought it might be a new boyfriend. But then a car pulled up, the back door opened, and he pushed her inside. Khwan tried to get away and dropped her bag. Ting found her phone and called me. It just happened. Just now.'

‘What?’ is all I can think of to say, but Salisa doesn’t answer.

Instead, she dashes over to Mali and shakes her a little by the shoulder. ‘Get up. We have to go fast’, she says.

‘Go?’ I ask, but I don’t need to ask.

‘We are going to Bangkok. Now’, Salisa says. ‘We have to find her.’

Mali is up, face set. She is calm again, as if she wasn’t just crying. Salisa begins running, and Mali struggles to catch up. Salisa is moving, not even aware of where she’s moving, except that every step is somehow taking her closer to Bangkok, and Khwan.

I’m moving too, running along with them. ‘I don’t understand’, I yell at Salisa through the crowd we are dashing through. ‘They’re kidnapping her for what?’ A teenaged boy shoves Salisa back as she barges past his family. She looks unbalanced for a second but doesn’t slow down.

‘These types of kidnappings are common in Bangkok’, Mali pants, short of breath. ‘She has probably been taken to a brothel, or to be sold as a sex slave to a rich foreigner. It usually happens to younger girls. We just have to get her back. That’s all.’

We reach the massage parlour. Salisa hurries to the back and goes upstairs immediately. Mali waits on the street with me for a moment. ‘I’m sorry’, she says. ‘We can’t continue helping you with your research. We have to go. I’m very sorry.’

‘No, I understand. No, of course, of course I understand.’

Mali smiles. ‘Thank you’, she says, and moves to go inside.

I’m not sure why I say what I say next, except that they’ve told me about Khwan. About Salisa’s desire to keep her out of the bars, at any cost. I know Khwan watched Salisa get into Ma’s car in the village all those years ago, to drive away to

the city, to earn the better life for her sister that suddenly seems in danger of disappearing forever. And, honestly, I just don't want to be left behind. 'Wait', I say.

Mali turns; she looks at me, polite as ever, somewhat exasperated. 'We need to hurry', she says. 'We may have already missed the last ferry.'

'Let me—I don't know', I say. 'Let me take you to the airport, at least. Forget about the ferry.'

'We can't afford to fly', Mali says simply. 'We'll take the next ferry. We'll call friends in Bangkok and see if they can start looking. It's all we can do.'

'Let me buy you plane tickets', I say, desperately.

Mali looks at me, calmly, from the outside. But from everything I've learnt about her, I know that she's not calm. She's astounded. 'It's a lot of money', she says simply.

'It's yours', I say. 'Please, let me help you.'

'Come upstairs', she says. 'Hurry.'

When I pass through the door in front of her, I trip a little bit, and she puts her hand on my shoulder. I think it's to steady me, and I think also it's something else.

I have never seen anyone pack so fast, or so little, as Salisa. She and Mali are speaking rapidly in Thai, and I can't understand a single word. I don't ask what is being said. Finally, Salisa speaks, her and Mali's things packed. 'Mali says you're paying for our plane tickets. Do you know how much they cost?'

'Roughly', I say.

She holds out her hand. She rarely accepts gifts from me; normally she feels uncomfortable doing so. That's when I realise that as upset as I believed Salisa to be, the reality is far, far worse. 'Let me have it', she demands.

'Wait', I say, trying to think.



‘No!’ she shouts. ‘We can’t wait. A girl we knew in Patpong got kidnapped. The police said if she wasn’t found in forty-eight hours it would be almost impossible to find her later. And they never found her! We have to go, now! If you want to help us, give us the money!’

‘Salisa’, Mali says.

‘I want to help you’, I say. ‘I’m going with you.’

Salisa stares at me, Mali as well.

‘You’re a researcher’, Mali says finally. ‘A lecturer.’

‘I have money’, I say. ‘I—I have diplomatic connections, sort of. I can be helpful.’

Salisa speaks slowly, her voice hoarse from shouting earlier. ‘You want to help us find Khwan’, she says.

‘Yes’, I say. ‘I want to help you find Khwan.’

Salisa immediately straightens up. ‘A taxi’, she says. ‘We need one, to the airport, now.’ We go to the street and hail a taxi and we’re gone.

I call my hotel from the taxi and tell them to check me out and send my things to the hotel we’ll be staying at in Bangkok. I tell them to put what it takes to get everything there by tomorrow on my credit card. It’s a lot of money; three plane tickets to Bangkok on short notice are a lot of money. I know I’m not allowed to use any of my research grant for this. But I can’t think about the money. I’m thinking about Salisa’s face, saying words I don’t understand in Thai under her breath, urging the driver to go faster, faster.

When we’re waiting for the plane, at the airport that reminds me of our honeymoon, I realise I need to call my husband. ‘Aidan’, I say. ‘I’m flying. I’m going to Bangkok.’

‘What happened?’ he asks; his voice is warm, jovial, normal. It’s the first normal thing I’ve heard in a while. ‘You got some interesting leads on your research? Salisa introduce you to someone who can get you into those closed brothels you’re always talking about? Or are you just running away with her?’ He laughs.

I close my eyes and rub my temples; it’s not funny anymore. ‘It’s an emergency’, I say. ‘It may be dangerous, I don’t know, so I thought I should at least tell you. I’m sorry. I have to go.’

‘Dangerous?’ he asks, and all the comfortable normality is gone from his voice; before I know what I’m doing I hang up the phone. Salisa and Mali haven’t even noticed. We board the ten p.m. flight, the last one.

When we are seated, my breathing returns to normal. I am sitting in the aisle. Mali is by the window on my left and Salisa is between us. I know that this is Salisa’s first time on a plane ever, and only Mali’s third. I hold Salisa’s hand as we take off. At first, I’m hesitant to do so because all the Thai guidebooks say that Thais really only have physical contact with their close friends and family that they have known for many years, and it isn’t common to hug or hold hands like it is Western countries. But Salisa grips my hand tight.

‘You want to help find my sister’, she says. She looks at my face, and I think she’s about to ask me what I’m suddenly wondering: *why?* ‘Thank you’, is all she says, and she closes her eyes and breathes sharply as the plane launches into the air.

## Chapter Seventeen

Once we're in Bangkok, Salisa directs our taxi driver to the Blossom Inn, where Khwan works. It makes sense we would go to the last place she was seen. I don't think anyone knows what we will do after that.

It is after midnight when we reach the hotel. As all three of us clamour out of the taxi and rush through the large glass doors. The small Thai woman behind the reception desk looks up at us. 'Salisa?' she asks. Her face is still wet.

'Yes', Salisa replies, still speaking in English for my benefit. 'Tell us again everything that you saw.'

Ting hurriedly retells her story; Mali translates for me. Ting points out where she was standing, and where Khwan was standing outside. She describes the man Khwan was talking to and the car she was pushed into. I am recording everything she says on my digital voice recorder, because it is faster than taking notes. I didn't ask for permission first. I don't care about the university ethics committee right now. I just know I need a record of what happened. A record and descriptions.

Ting goes behind her desk and retrieves Khwan's handbag. We sit down in the lobby and Salisa pours everything out, looking for clues. There's nothing but makeup, a hairbrush, keys, Khwan's mobile and some tissues. 'There's nothing', she says. 'There's nothing here that tells us anything!'

'Where are the police?' I ask.

'I called them right after I called Salisa', Ting says. 'They haven't come yet.'

'What?' I ask. 'It's been nearly five hours since—since this happened!'

Ting blinks.

‘It’s not unusual’, Mali says. ‘Girls get taken all the time.’

Ting sniffs in agreement.

‘But it’s been five hours!’ I say. Mali nods, frowning to herself, but she doesn’t seem surprised. That’s the most surprising thing of all to me, maybe. ‘We can’t just wait for them’, I say. ‘We have to do something!’

‘This is not like being a tourist at a resort’, Mali explains to me, her voice calm. ‘You can’t just order up the police, like from a menu.’ She’s trying to be polite, I can tell. But I don’t really register the note of exasperation, because she’s reminded me of something.

‘Actually, I can. Sort of’, I say. ‘Ting. Do you have the number of the Bangkok Tourist Police?’

Ting has the number, and I call the tourist police. About twenty minutes after my phone call, two tourist police and two regular police arrive. They sweep in and Salisa gets up hurriedly to talk to them. Mali stays next to me, staring. ‘They came right away’, she says.

‘Great’, I say. ‘I figured they’d respond quickly if they knew a Westerner was involved.’ She looks at me, and although I’m happy that I was able to do something, I wish somehow I hadn’t said it that way.

Ting retells her story to the police. I watch them. They seem to be attentive, and taking it seriously. The tallest of them, one of the tourist police, talks to us in a low, deep voice, trying to calm everyone down.

Salisa is still pawing through Khwan’s bag, looking at every single thing inside, over and over. She has called every number stored in Khwan’s phone. All her contacts, and all of her received calls and dialled numbers. There aren’t many

numbers there and none of them are men. Mostly the numbers are a few friends from her village and in Chiang Mai, and other hotel staff members.

‘This is a million times worse than when we lost her in Patong’, Mali says to me. I know what she means. Salisa wasn’t here to see her go missing this time. She can’t get her friends together to run down the road and find her. And given that Khwan was dressed in her hotel uniform and standing outside on the street, it’s clear that this story isn’t going to end with us finding her with a well-meaning Westerner.

‘Justin!’ I exclaim.

‘Who?’ Salisa asks.

‘You know, Justin, the guy who accidentally kidnapped Khwan in Patong’, I say.

‘He worked for an organisation’, Salisa said. ‘An organisation that helps women who get kidnapped or sold to brothels.’

‘It was in Bangkok’, Mali says.

‘He can help us!’ I say. ‘Or they can, the organisation. What is it called?’

‘The name of it is a bunch of letters’, Salisa said. ‘AAT ... I don’t remember. I don’t have his card. It was years ago.’

‘I looked it up, after you told me the story’, I say. ‘Hang on.’ I take my fat notebook out of my handbag and flick through it so fast and hard that some of the pages tear. ‘I’ve got it’, I say. ‘Action against Prostitution and Trafficking in Thailand. AAPT.’

The tall officer seems to have overheard me and comes back over to us. ‘We don’t know that this is related to prostitution or trafficking’, he says. ‘Let’s go slowly now.’

‘We don’t know yet what has happened’, said one of the tourist policemen. ‘We can’t jump to any conclusions. She may have just left suddenly with a boyfriend.’ I am instantly angry. ‘No, that clearly isn’t what has happened’, I say, and loudly. ‘Ting saw everything. Khwan didn’t get into the car, she was pushed violently. She dropped her handbag on the side of the road in the scuffle. She wouldn’t have left it behind if she was going willingly. And she wouldn’t have left willingly anyway—she was in the middle of her shift. And she doesn’t *have* a boyfriend. There is clear evidence that this is a kidnapping.’ Salisa is nodding and echoing what I say in Thai, even though it seems all these officers speak English. Mali is staring at me again.

‘Please tell me again, miss, what is your involvement?’ Officer Tall asks, smiling stiffly. I suspect he’s looking for a way to un-involve me.

‘I am *Dr* Larissa O’Brien’, I say, using my title, my full name and as much authority in my voice as I can muster. ‘These are my friends and colleagues. My research assistants. Khwan is their sister. I am intricately involved. In fact, my research, commissioned by an Australian university, is *on* prostitution in Thailand. So I recognise it when I see it’, I lie.

Salisa is again echoing what I’m saying in Thai. The police are watching me, looking at one another every so often. ‘You’re doing research’, one of them says. ‘On prostitution in Thailand?’

‘She is’, says Mali. ‘And on the response to it by the police.’ I smile tightly. The police look at one another again, but it’s clear they’ve reached a decision about how seriously they’re going to take this kidnapping.

Now that the threat of media exposure has been dangled over them, the police get very efficient. They pull photos of Khwan off her mobile phone and Ting prints

them from the reception desk computer. They take our mobile numbers and give us numbers to contact them on. ‘We will distribute this photo and all our cars will be looking for her’, Officer Tall says. ‘We normally don’t take any action on missing person’s cases for forty-eight hours. But since we have evidence of a kidnapping’, he looks pointedly at me, ‘and she is not just lost, we will do everything we can, beginning straight away.’

‘Where are you staying?’ one of the other officers asks.

‘They’re staying here’, Ting says. ‘Free of charge.’ Salisa smiles at her, the first time she’s smiled, really, since that terrible phone call just six hours ago now.

‘Very good’, says Officer Tall. ‘Then we’ll let you know about any developments.’

‘Fine’, says Salisa. ‘So you’ll let us know where you think they’ve taken her. Do you have any suspicions now?’

Officer Tall looks at her, and at all of us. ‘This is a matter for the police’, he says. ‘You should not go looking for this girl yourself. I know you are thinking she has been taken to a brothel or something like that. But you must not go looking around, it is dangerous.’ He looks at Salisa when he says dangerous. ‘We will take care of this. There is no need to involve anyone else.’

The police leave. ‘What are you going to do?’ Ting asks.

‘Let’s involve someone else’, I say.

Ting lets us use her computer to Google Action against Prostitution and Trafficking in Thailand and find their website. No one picks up when I try to call their office, it being the middle of the night. Salisa and Mali watch; I don’t know if they’ve used the internet much before. With some careful searching, I find a

Facebook profile for someone named Justin, his current job listed as AAPTT, his current location, thank God, still Thailand.

‘You can find anyone this way?’ Salisa asks.

‘If they’re on Facebook’, I say. ‘Which he is.’ I start drafting a message to him, explaining the situation.

We take our things to the large interconnecting rooms Ting has given us. I call the hotel in Samui and make sure they’re sending my things along; they are. Salisa and Mali take turns showering and changing their clothes, mainly because I don’t think they know what else to do. Ting manages to get some food sent up to us, even with the kitchen closed. I wait for the two of them to finish their showers, not hungry.

Mali sits on the bed, balancing her plate on her lap, and Salisa and I sit on the couch. Salisa moves a coffee table to directly in front of her and puts her mobile on it. She puts her food on her lap and eats while staring at her phone. ‘Khwan might call’, she explains, when she sees us both looking at her. ‘She might get away, and she might call.’

‘We need to sleep’, Mali tells her. ‘We have a lot to do tomorrow.’

‘I’ll sleep when Khwan calls’, Salisa snaps.

‘Oh God’, I say. ‘Hang on. I’ll be right back.’

‘What is it?’ Salisa asks. ‘Did you think of something? Someone we might call, now?’

‘No’, I say. ‘It doesn’t have to do with Khwan. It’s Aidan. I’ll be right back. I’m sorry.’



I go into my own bathroom, sit down, and call Aidan. ‘What happened’, he asks, alarmed. ‘I’ve been calling the hotel. I’ve been calling everywhere I could think of!’

‘I’m sorry’, I say, and suddenly the tension and exhaustion of the past six hours hit me at once; I slump down on the floor. ‘I’m sorry. Salisa’s sister, she disappeared.’

‘Salisa’s sister disappeared? *You* disappeared, Lara.’ I close my eyes and press the phone tightly to my ear. ‘Where are you?’ Aidan asks.

‘Bangkok’, I say. ‘I’m in a hotel in Bangkok. I’ll text you the number. They kidnapped her, Aidan. Someone from ... from a brothel, I think. They kidnapped this eighteen-year-old girl.’

‘Oh my God’, Aidan says, suddenly without the note of anger in his voice. ‘What’s going on? Are the police involved yet?’

‘They hadn’t come when we got here’, I say. ‘It took them five hours to get here. Until I called the tourist police. Aidan—I don’t know if they would have come at all.’

My husband is silent, somewhere across the ocean, half a world away. ‘You’re going to stay there’, he says. ‘You’re going to keep following this thing. Aren’t you?’

‘Yes’, I say.

He asks me what Salisa didn’t. ‘Why?’ he asks. ‘Lara—you’re a researcher. A university lecturer, for Christ’s sake. You’re not a detective.’

‘I don’t know what I am’, I say to him.

We’re both quiet for a while, me sitting on the floor of the bathroom in a very nice hotel in one of the greatest cities of the world. At least it had always been one of

the greatest as far as I was concerned. ‘Do you remember those giant lizards?’ he asked. ‘I remember those lizards.’

‘The huge green ones’, I say. ‘We were terrified they might drop on our heads, the whole time we were staying at the villa.’

‘There probably aren’t those lizards where you are now’, he says.

‘Not in my hotel’, I say. ‘I have to go.’

‘I love you’, he says. ‘I want you to be careful. Let me know what’s going on.’

‘I will’, I say.

He pauses. Breathes. ‘I think you’re very brave’, he says after a while. ‘Too brave, actually.’

I laugh, but it is hollow, and we both say good night and hang up. I keep sitting on the floor for a long time.

## Chapter Eighteen

Samui was much nicer than Phuket. Salisa had noticed it right away, the moment she and Mali arrived there in June 2008. Mali hardly seemed to notice at all, her mind wrapped up in preparations for life with Bill.

Samui was smaller than Phuket. You could drive around the entire island on Ring Road in under an hour. Chaweng, the busiest part of Samui, was like just one road in Patong. As if Bangla Road was plopped down on Chaweng and lengthened, but without all the other busy roads around it. If you left the busy parts of Chaweng and walked in any direction, you could find some peace.

Salisa felt like Samui put the best parts of Thai culture on show for the tourists. Almost all of the Thai people who lived on the island were there because the tourists were there. Hardly any of the people Salisa met were born on Samui. Most had come to work in the tourism industry. Salisa liked it anyway.

The Spicy Mango's *mamasan* came through for Salisa, and her brother gave Salisa a job at his hostess bar, the Coconut Tree, one of the bars crowded onto the little piece of land jutting into Chaweng Lake, just behind Chaweng Beach Road. She had experience at this point and came recommended, and it didn't take her long to find a room—without Mali, this time.

Mali stayed with Bill in the condo he rented in Bophut. Since he had Mali to take care of all his cooking, cleaning and laundry, he didn't feel the need to stay in a hotel. Mali now fulfilled the role of all of the hotel staff. 'Moving up in the world', Salisa told her when Mali complained to her about the workload. Mali stuck her tongue out, but was too tired to think of a better way to respond.

Bill had let Mali sell her pink and white Isuzu scooter before they left Phuket and send the money to her family. He then bought her another once they reached Samui. Mali chose the same model, but green and white this time. She rode her scooter for about ten to fifteen minutes from Bophut to Chaweng to visit Salisa there every day. Mali didn't tell Bill that Salisa had also moved to Samui. After all, she was a student at the Prince of Songkla University's campus on Phuket, and it wouldn't be realistic for her to transfer to the one small university on Samui just because Mali would be staying there for a short time. Mali was still able to see Salisa in the afternoons, once Salisa had woken up and while Bill was still working during the day. Since Salisa slept most of the day and then worked all night, while Bill was home with Mali sleeping, Mali wasn't worried about them running into each other.

Bill had applied for a fiancée visa for Mali to travel to Australia with him, where they would be legally married, and then he would apply for permanent residency for Mali. But Mali also wanted to have a Buddhist wedding ceremony while still in Thailand. Bill agreed, and asked if she wanted him to pay for her family to come from Isaan to Samui, for the wedding.

'What did you tell him?' Salisa asked. 'Your whole house of cards story goes down in two seconds if he meets your family.'

'I told him that the village didn't understand marriage with Westerners very well', she said. 'That my family would be ostracised if people knew they had come to a wedding with a Westerner. That it was a dramatic thing to do, and that I was making a very special exception for him.'

'Because he's so smart and wonderful and knowledgeable about building tourist hotels', Salisa said.

'Yes, exactly', Mali said, smiling.

‘And he doesn’t care at all about not meeting your family?’ Salisa asked.

‘He must care, on some level’, Mali said. ‘He’s just very busy, is all.’

‘Am I invited to the wedding?’ Salisa asked after a moment.

‘Of course’, said Mali. ‘He’s even given me money to send to you, to get you a ticket from Phuket to Samui for the special day.’

They went out and used some of that money to buy an extravagant late lunch.

The wedding came along and went soon after. It was a small affair, mostly Bill’s business partners, Salisa on the sidelines in a dress from a fancy Western boutique at the airport, Mali surprisingly radiant as the Buddhist monk Bill had found performed the ceremony and the deed was done. Salisa was able to speak to Mali briefly during the quiet reception at an expensive restaurant afterward, but otherwise Bill kept her close the entire time. Before long, it was time for Salisa to leave, take off the fancy dress, put on her glitter and high heels, and go to work.

‘Congratulations to Mali’, she said, toasting with her new co-workers, none of whom had ever met Mali. ‘The bargirl who made good!’ The other girls toasted and cheered, then quickly went back to serving drinks and welcoming *farang*.

By early December that year, Mali and Bill were gone. Salisa found out the day before they were leaving.

‘It’s just going to be for a short trip’, Mali said. ‘I think. Not for good. He has to renew his visa before he can come back to Thailand, which means we have to stay there for a while, so we might as well do the wedding—the real one.’

‘The one I can’t go to, you mean’, Salisa said.

‘Yes, that one’, Mali said coolly. ‘Don’t sulk. And I need to do some paperwork or something to apply for my residency, so it may take a while. But not too long a while.’

‘You’re moving all of your things there’, Salisa said, not really making it sound like a question. ‘I don’t have so many things’, Mali said. ‘It’ll just be for a little while. I really need to go.’ Salisa watched her best friend move towards the door.

‘If you leave forever, I’ll hate you forever’, she said. ‘That’s a promise.’

Mali smiled. ‘You won’t hate me forever’, she said. She hugged her, and then she was gone.

The night Salisa met the first man she would fall in love with, it was raining hard. Even though the rainy season ended in the middle of November, this December, in 2008, some bad weather had bled through, and that night most tourists were probably staying at their hotels instead of venturing out.

Salisa was playing pool with two of the other bargirls when the *farang* came into the bar by himself, soaking wet. ‘Where’s the bathroom?’ he asked loudly, in English, and Salisa and her friends turned their attention, momentarily roused, back to their pool game. If he was planning on using the bathroom and leaving, he was a waste of attention, even on a night like tonight. But once he came out, having dried himself as well as he could and smoothed down his hair, he took a seat at a table at the back.

‘You want him?’ Salisa asked two of her co-workers in Thai.

‘Not tonight’, one said. ‘I just want to sink this corner pocket.’

‘You’re all so lazy’, Salisa chirped happily, and the other woman looked up, offended. Salisa apologised quickly, but missed Mali for the hundredth time. Mali understood her humour.

She went over to the *farang* and put on her most professional smile. ‘Can I maybe get you a towel?’ she asked. ‘You look like you were out in the rain for hours.’ Looking him in the face for the first time, she saw that he was startlingly handsome. His soaked t-shirt clung to his muscular chest and he looked back at her with huge, brown eyes.

‘Yeah, thanks’, he said, his accent obviously Australian. ‘Actually, I was only outside for like a minute. I just got off a *song theow* and walked down the road to come here.’

‘Oh, have you been here before?’

‘No, I’m meeting my mates here. The bastards are late, probably because they didn’t want to go out in the rain.’ He ran his hands through his hair. Salisa watched his every move. Most *farang* looked the same to her these days. This one stood out.

‘I’m impressed’, Salisa said. ‘You were brave, to come here through the rain.’

He laughed, crinkles forming around his mouth in all the right places. ‘It’s only a bit of rain’, he said. ‘You just went through the monsoon season. Are you putting me on?’

Salisa blinked, but recovered; she wasn’t used to customers calling her on the ridiculous flattery she sometimes indulged in. ‘My name is Salisa’, she said, handing him the hand towel she grabbed from behind the bar. ‘Sorry, I don’t have anything bigger.’

‘S’okay. I’m Beau.’

Salisa got all the normal questions out of the way quickly: how long are you in Thailand for; are you on holiday; do you have a girlfriend or wife; what do you do? He answered dutifully: three weeks; yes, holiday from uni; no girlfriend, no wife; engineering student who had just finished the third year of his four-year degree. None of what he said was much out of the ordinary. But she hung on every word, this time for real.

‘Would you like a drink?’ she asked.

‘Only if you’ll drink with me. At least until my friends get here?’ He smiled a huge, bright smile.

‘Sure thing’, Salisa smiled back. ‘What would you like?’ She quietly glanced at the other girls, hoping none of them were planning to pick up the work from her, but they were arguing about how one of them had hit a striped ball when she should have been going for solids, and paid no attention.

‘Why don’t you pick for me. Get us two of whatever you like to drink best.’

Rather than picking what she really liked the most, which was a sweet cocktail called Samui Sunset—white rum, grenadine, pineapple, orange and lemon juice, and sugar syrup—she chose what she thought Beau was most likely to enjoy: a bottle of Corona with a slice of lime, and a shot of tequila. Salisa hated both of those drinks, but brought two of each back to the table.

‘Exactly what I would have chosen’, he said, drinking the shot as soon as Salisa had set it down. He pushed the lime down into the bottle of Corona and started gulping it down right afterwards. She watched his throat as he swallowed.

‘Here, take mine’, she laughed. ‘Seems like you will need another one!’ She pushed her shot over to him, hoping she wouldn’t have to drink it, and took a small sip of the Corona. Thankfully, he drank the other shot just as fast.



Salisa was still sipping her first Corona and Beau was sloshed from a never-ending line of tequila shots by the time his five friends arrived. They descended upon the bar, already drunk from their hotel bar, like a pack of gorillas. Loud, rude gorillas. The other girls finally sighed, put away the pool cues, and put on their business smiles for the new arrivals.

They greeted Beau with some grunts and slaps on the back. 'I see you've already found yourself a nice piece of Thai meat for the evening', one of his friends said, scouring the bar, looking for a companion of his own.

'Be respectful', Beau slurred. 'This's Salisa. She's my friend. She's bringing me tequila shots.'

His friend turned to Salisa and made a grotesque parody of a *wai*. 'Hello Sa-li-sa, how are you?' he said, very loudly and very slowly. He looked her up and down openly.

'I'm very well, thank you', Salisa said quickly, giving him the huge, toothy smile she reserved for people she particularly objected to. Then she added a short phrase in Thai, making it sound like a cute question. 'When you get sick, apes, do you go to the human doctor or the veterinarian?'

Beau suddenly snorted and coughed, spilling some of his drink. Salisa looked at him in surprise. She smiled again at his friends. 'You want drink like him?' she asked in an exaggerated accent and feigned poor English, then quickly moved away from Beau's table and took a seat alone at the bar. She breathed deeply and counted to herself slowly. She hadn't reached ten before Beau was by her side, putting his hand on her shoulder. She turned quickly.

'I'm sorry about that', he muttered.

‘You know some Thai?’ she asked, cross. She had never known a tourist to have learnt much Thai, except Dave.

‘I recognised the word apes’, he said. ‘I know some animals, and some colours. Numbers, the word for bathroom, you know. I got the gist.’ One of his friends was already making out with a bargirl in the corner, one was licking salt off the stomach of another bargirl and the remaining three were ordering more drinks and pushing each other around.

‘I think your friends aren’t very *nice*’, Salisa said, but she smiled as she said it, and offered Beau a seat. He took it.

‘You’re not very *nice*’, he said. ‘Are you?’

She was a little taken aback. She had actually thought she was still acting pretty nice. ‘I can be nice’, she said, and he laughed.

‘I hope not’, he said. ‘I’ve been to a lot of bars. All bargirls are kind of nice in this fake way. It bugs me, you know?’

‘How terrible for you’, Salisa said. ‘Perhaps if you pay an additional fee, we bargirls could try on different moods and emotions for you.’ She was agitated by him, but she still found him very attractive. It was a little infuriating.

‘You’ll be rude to me for free though’, he slurred. She couldn’t help it; she laughed. He laughed too, and raised his Corona. ‘You want another Corona?’ he asked. ‘You probably hate these, too, don’t you?’ She smiled and ordered the cocktail she wanted. She clinked glasses with him while the loud false laughter of her new co-workers filled the space behind her. ‘I like you’, he said. ‘Don’t judge me by my friends. I’m different.’

‘We’ll see’, Salisa said. But she already believed he was.

At the end of the night, he paid her bar fine and the two of them stumbled to his little hut on Lamai beach. It was a cheap hotel, but not as cheap as some she'd been to. 'From humble beginnings', he snorted as he was taking his clothes off. 'One day I'm gonna be rich 'n' famous, Sleesa. You're gonna see. Stick with me and I'll lift you up outta all of this.'

'You're a real hero to Thai womanhood', Salisa snickered. With his clothes off, he was beautiful, even in the dark of the tiny hut. 'Do you want a short time, or all night?' she asked.

'Short', he said. 'That okay?'

'That's fine', she said, keeping her voice even, and took off her clothes as well.

They had sex, and she kissed him goodbye afterward, slowly, something she often tried not to do. He seemed tired, but happy. She walked out to the beach and walked slowly along the side of the dark ocean for a long time, light rain falling into the waves, thinking about Mali somewhere across the distance—and, strangely, she realised she was also still thinking about Beau.

Mali had thought that she would be excited to leave Thailand, and her old life, behind. When she first met Bill and was hoping to be his wife, she could think of nothing but moving to live in a rich, Western country. She didn't want to remember what it was like growing up without electricity and running water. She didn't want to remember what it was like being sent to Bangkok to have sex with strange men to earn enough money for her family.

But since she had become Bill's girlfriend and now his wife, she realised that living in Thailand wasn't what she needed to escape. She was more than hesitant to

leave Thailand behind and move to Australia, a country she knew almost nothing about. All she knew was what Salisa had told her, which was only what she had heard from Christian and Dave. Bill had hardly spoken to Mali about his country at all.

A week after Mali had landed in Australia, she sent her first email to Salisa.

*Dear Salisa,*

*I have so much to tell you, there is no way I can do it in just one email. The idea of writing it all down seems exhausting right now anyway. I was terrified for both of the flights we took. Samui to Singapore first. Then, we flew overnight from Singapore to Adelaide. It was crazy, Salisa—you start to go up, and the back of the plane hangs below you and the front above you like you're walking up a huge hill, and you just watch the land sink beneath you like it's nothing, and then you're in the air. I kept thinking that we were going to crash, wondering what the flight attendants were saying, if they seemed like they knew we were going to die, but of course it was fine.*

*When we arrived at the airport, we had to drive for an hour to get to Bill's house. A white car with a driver in a uniform took us. The place where Bill lives is called Victor Harbour. It is an hour away from the city, Adelaide. It is right on the beach. The beach isn't as nice as the ones at Phuket or Samui, but still nice. His house is a mansion, Salisa. It has two floors. I have never been inside a house this big in my life. I can't believe that he is the only person who lives here. I found photos of children, and Bill told me for the first time that he has three children from his first wife. They are all grown up now and they have children of their own. He is a grandfather! But I think maybe he wants to have another baby. I can't imagine having a baby here in this huge house and looking after it all by myself.*

*I'm in the computer room. It's a room that has nothing in it but two desks and two computers, for when his grandchildren come to stay, so they can play games. I can use the internet whenever I want, so I will be able to email you all the time. You won't even have time to miss me, because you will be reading my emails every day.*

*I'm not sure when I'll be able to come back, Salisa. With Bill not involved in the hotel in Samui after all there's no business that'll bring him there, so I'm trying to find out from him when he thinks we could go just for fun, for a holiday, so I can come back to see you. He says it may not be a good idea to go back until the residency things are settled. I don't know; I trust him. But I miss Thailand so much.*

*I never disliked Thailand, really. You know that. It was just being poor in Thailand that I wasn't so crazy about. Living with Bill in a fancy hotel and then in a condo, it was stressful, but I still got to speak Thai, and eat Thai food, and see Thai friends. I got to see you all the time, you know; it's a wonder you weren't exhausted every night at work with how much of your time I wasted! But it was everything I'd ever wanted, those times. I hope he does decide to build the resort and I can come back to see you for a while. Either way, I'll come back as soon as I can.*

*And until then, I'll continue to waste your time with my emails. I know you will appreciate that.*

*Love, Mali*

Salisa read the email a few times over, then called Beau's Thai mobile, the cheap one he bought for his holiday. She'd seen him a few more times since the night on the beach; he'd come in the day after and asked for her, and spent the whole evening talking to her, even trying the cocktail she liked. This time, and every time

after, he paid for the whole night. In the morning, they walked on the beach together and once she held his hand, and he let her.

‘Salisa’, he said now. ‘How’s my favourite whore with a heart of gold?’

‘You flatter me so much’, she laughed, knowing that it wasn’t really funny.

‘What are you doing tonight? Are you coming to the bar?’

He cleared his throat. ‘Not tonight’, he said. ‘I’m just having dinner with friends.’

‘If you pay my bar fine for the night, I’m more than willing to sacrifice my principles and hang out with your horrible friends’, she smiled.

It sounded like he was laughing but it was a bad connection. ‘I wish’, he said. ‘I can’t afford to do that tonight. Um. I’ll see you later in the week, okay?’

‘Not okay at all’, she said, but she made her voice sound light, joking. He laughed, and told her again that he’d see her later, and hung up. She went to work and wondered whether he was visiting some other bar. She put it out of her mind. He wouldn’t do that, she thought. He was different. He’d said so.

Beau came back two days later, paid her bar fine, and took her to dinner. They drank banana shakes and chattered for hours, Salisa telling stories of her early days at the Lotus in Bangkok, Beau about different funny things that had happened to him in high school in Australia.

‘We’re the same’, Salisa announced at one point during the meal. ‘We’re like the same person split into two bodies. There’s no two ways about it.’

‘Except one of us is a future engineer, a productive member of Western society’, said Beau. ‘The other is a crazy Thai bargirl. Between us you get the entirety of human experience.’

‘The high and the low, is that it?’ Salisa smiled, lips tight.

‘Come on’, he said. ‘I didn’t mean it like that.’

‘I know’, said Salisa. ‘You’re such an adorable boorish *farang*.’ He didn’t know the word; she taught him how to say it, and some other words, for the rest of the meal. He taught her English words she didn’t know, engineering words: torque and buttress and inflammable.

‘I like *inflammable*’, she said.

After dinner, they stood on the street, Salisa checking her messages on her phone, Beau with his hands in his pockets. ‘What are we doing’, Salisa said. ‘Do you want, you know, a short time? Or do you want me to stay with you the whole night?’

He shifted on his feet. ‘We don’t have to’, he said. ‘If you don’t want to, I mean.’

She smiled at him. ‘No, I want to’, she said. ‘It’s fine. Let’s go.’

After they were finished, he fell asleep, turned away from her in the dark hut on the beach. She traced her fingers over his back and listened to the waves somewhere close by outside.

She emailed Dave the next day. *I’m in deep*, she wrote.

He wrote back straight away. *Oh my God, Sassy, tell me everything*.

She did, in another email. *I think he really loves me*, she wrote. *I really love him, anyway. It’s not some ridiculous Mali situation*.

*Be careful, Sassy*, Dave wrote in his reply.

After three weeks of steadily paying Salisa’s bar fine, it was time for Beau to leave. She sat in her chair and nodded at her drink. ‘Okay’, she said. ‘I’ll see you off at the airport.’

‘There won’t be time’, he said. ‘My stupid friends want to do a hike up into the hills that morning, then get a taxi to the airport right from there. I’m sorry.’

She finished her drink. ‘I see’, she said. ‘That’s it. I hope you had a really good time in Thailand.’

‘Hey’, he said, trying to take her hand; she pulled it away.

‘I’m glad you’ll have lots of great stories to tell about the local wildlife, and everything’, Salisa said. ‘I’m really happy for you.’

‘Salisa’, Beau said. ‘I love you, okay?’

She stared at him. They had only been together for two weeks, and he hadn’t even been very nice to her the whole time. But she felt drawn to him; something about the two of them sparked. ‘I love you’, he repeated. ‘And I’m going to come back to see you, okay? I have to get back to uni now. But I can come to Samui again during the mid-semester break. It’s around Easter time. April.’

‘That’s four months away’, she said.

‘A little less’, he said, and smiled. ‘You’ll do fine until then. You’ll keep busy.’

She sighed and looked at the table, trying not to cry. ‘I don’t want to keep busy’, she said. ‘I used to think Mali was so stupid.’

‘What do you mean, Mali?’ he asked. Salisa realised that she had never mentioned her to him. She couldn’t believe it.

‘I don’t want to go with anyone else’, she said. ‘This job was fine—no, I mean this job was *not* fine. But it was bearable when I wasn’t—you know.’

‘In love’, Beau said.



‘Yeah’, Salisa said, looking him in the eye. ‘Yeah, those are maybe the right English words for it.’ Beau tried to take her hand again, this time she let him. She started to cry.

‘If I were rich, I’d pay your bar fine for the whole four months’, Beau said. ‘You could do whatever you wanted, go wherever you wanted until I got back.’ He cleared his throat. ‘I’m not that rich, Salisa. I wish we lived in a world where I was rich, but we don’t. There’s no way.’

‘I know there’s no way’, she said. She had seen how he threw money around, though. Heard him talk about his life back home. His parents, and their money. She wanted to ask him if he could pay, she didn’t know, for one month of bar fines? Two weeks? But if she asked for that, what would he think of her? Would he come back for her at all? ‘I really understand that there’s no way’, she said.

‘I understand that you’ll have to do what you’ll have to do’, Beau said. ‘That you’ll have to sleep with other men. It’s okay. I won’t be jealous. I completely understand.’ He held her hand more tightly as he said it; she narrowed her eyes.

‘Okay’, she said. ‘It’d be nice if you were a little jealous.’

‘Don’t make this hard’, Beau said, a little too firmly. ‘Look. I have to go early in the morning. Let me pay your fine tonight. We’ll have one last great night in Thailand. A night to remember.’

She let him pay the fine, and they went straight back to his hut. In the morning, he was still asleep when she woke up and gathered her things. He’d paid her twice her normal fee for the night, the money left on her pile of clothes. She watched him snore, the marks on his shoulder where her fingers had dug in, and she thought about waiting, being there when his friends got there, going with them on their hike, tagging along to the airport, to have those last moments with this

inexplicable man before he took off to Australia, where so many people she knew had been going lately. But she wasn't invited. So she left, went home, and lay awake in her own bed looking at the ceiling, watching the clock on her mobile phone, until the time came when she knew his flight had taken off, and he was gone.

## Chapter Nineteen

It's already the early evening in Bangkok now, the bars already open. We slept for most of today without meaning to, having been up almost all night. Khwan is still missing. Salisa's mobile hasn't rung, and Justin still hasn't gotten back to me. Armed with photocopies of Khwan's photo, we take a taxi to Patpong. I haven't been here before, but it is exactly as I imagined it from everything I've read, and exactly as Salisa described it to me.

The Lotus, where the two of them had worked, is still there. There's an unusually tall Thai woman dressed in hot pink short shorts and a glittery white, see-through top behind the bar. Salisa goes over to talk to her. As she approaches, the tall woman's face twists into a frown, but quickly softens as Salisa speaks to her, and then suddenly her hands are on Salisa's shoulders, gently.

'Lily will help us', Salisa tells us when she comes back. 'She'll put up the photos and ask the customers.'

'That was Lily?' I ask. 'I thought Lily hated you.'

'She does', said Mali. 'But she'll help. She knows how bad this is.'

'It must be shocking', I say.

'No', says Mali. 'It's not shocking. Just bad.'

'We're wasting time', says Salisa. 'Come on.'

We walk back out into the street. Our plan: hold up the pictures of Khwan and start stopping people like the Terminator. 'Have you seen this girl? Have you seen this girl?' We walk up and down the street for hours into the night, asking everyone if they have seen her. I don't know how effective this is as a search

strategy, but I really can't think of anything else to do. And Salisa is right that some of these customers do go to other places looking for sex. They could see Khwan.

'If you see her, please call the police. She has been kidnapped.' I explain it again and again. Most *farang* only throw a red-eyed glance at the photo and just keep walking, or shake their heads. They are all drunk and, by the early hours of the morning, mostly on their way out of Patpong. The young Thai women look carefully and apologise when they say they haven't seen her. They give us knowing, sympathetic looks. Maybe this is more common than I thought, I don't know. Eventually, exhausted, we go back to the hotel to continue waiting. It's all we can do. We all go straight to bed, without talking. When I wake up the next morning, I check my email on my laptop. There's a message from Justin waiting.

The AAPTT office is in the business district, on a side street off Sukhumvit Road near Sukhumvit Plaza. It takes us over half an hour to get there in a taxi, fighting through traffic, though it doesn't seem to be very far away.

Justin meets us at the door. He looks worried, but professional. He *wais* to Salisa and Mali and shakes my hand. 'It's good to see you again', he says to Salisa and Mali. 'I'm glad I gave you that card.' Based on what Salisa told me before about how she had interacted with Justin, I expect her to make some crack at this. But she just nods. I wonder how much sleep she's getting.

We walk into what feels like a professional operation that is already in full swing to find Khwan. Justin stays close to us and an older Thai woman does most of the talking. She introduces herself as Pakpao. Mali whispers to me that her name means 'fighter kite' and that's a good omen. I don't know what a fighter kite is, but the word 'fighter' inspires hope.

‘The first thing you need to know is we have been through this before and we have successfully brought other families’ little girls and young women home to them. You can be hopeful. It is possible that we will find Khwan. This happened less than forty-eight hours ago. You have already done the right thing by coming to us. We can help.’

She tell us their plan. They have male volunteers, both Thai and *farang*, who work for them undercover. They regularly pose as customers and go into the closed brothels to talk to the women. They check their health, bring them condoms, and tell them that they can help them if they want to escape. They look for women who are trying to get out and need their help. They can go in and look for Khwan.

‘I want to assure you’, she says. ‘We do work with the police.’

Salisa looks up. ‘The police told us not to come to you’, she says. ‘Can we maybe not work with the police?’

Pakpao smiles. ‘We have some good officers to work with. Though it’s true, mostly the police are either indifferent, unhelpful or, worse, involved in the brothels themselves. Sometimes as customers, and sometimes even as owners.’

I had read about this already, but am still shocked and disgusted to hear it in real life. Some of the things I have read about prostitution in Thailand didn’t seem real to me at first. They were too awful for me to accept them as real. It was like I knew in theory that these things were true, but consciously I let myself think that the world on paper that describes these horrors is not connected to the real world in which we live. I hate for that delusion to be shattered.

Once, I had wanted to find a way to research these brothels. I had been terrified that I’d never get the kind of access that I’m getting now. But now I don’t want to know about this. It is a horrible world. It is huge, and it is out of my control,

and it involves hundreds of thousands of women in Thailand alone. Millions. I can't help. I feel like I can't help. But maybe I can help Khwan. Maybe that can be enough.

We stay at the office for about three hours finding out more about Pakpao's organisation and how it works, and then we go back to the hotel. When we get back to the room, Salisa's mobile finally rings. She grabs it so fast that she drops it. 'It's Dave', she says, reading the screen, and answers quickly.

Salisa talks to Dave mostly in English, so I hear what is happening. 'Mali and Lara are here', she says at one point. She doesn't then explain who Lara is; Dave must already know. This makes me smile, for the first time in some time. She talks to him for a while, then hangs up. 'Dave is coming to Bangkok', she says.

Then she walks over to the bed and falls into a very deep, very necessary sleep.

## Chapter Twenty

Beau did come back to Samui, just as he promised, during his break over Easter the next year, 2009. He came with only one of his friends this time and he asked Salisa to meet him at the airport. Salisa took the night off work from the bar because she didn't want him to have to pay her bar fine to see her, especially not on his first night back. He took her to their hotel. Instead of staying in the cheap backpacker's with the tiny huts, they stayed in a nice four-star resort on Lamai beach, the Samui Sea.

'This is wonderful', she said. 'You must be feeling guilty about not emailing me enough, right?'

'I'd forgotten how feisty you are in person', he laughed. 'I email you all the time.'

'I email you twice every week, at least', she said. 'You email me twice every month, maybe.'

'I've got a lot of things to do', he shrugged.

She glowered at him. *I've got a lot of customers to do*, she thought about saying. She didn't say it. She also didn't charge him for sex or ask him to pay her bar fine for the entire two weeks. Her savings were getting lighter because of it, but it didn't matter so much. She could still just cover her obligations to her family and Khwan and keep a roof over her head. After all, it was only two weeks that he'd be here; she ought to celebrate it however she could, while she had the chance to.

At first he seemed concerned when she told him that he didn't have to worry about the bar fine on this trip, that she and her *mamasan* had come to an understanding, not telling him what it was costing her. After a while he didn't seem

so concerned, and almost seemed to have forgotten that there ever was a period when he'd had to pay for his nights with her. Sometimes she got mad and wished that he'd remember, realise the sacrifices she was making for him; but most of the time she was glad that he'd seemed to have forgotten that she was a bargirl.

This time when Beau left, he let her come to the airport with him, held her for a long time before going through the security checkpoint. 'I'll come back again', he said. 'For another two weeks. You'll hear from me.'

'I hope so', she said. 'If you don't have too many things to do.' He laughed and held her tighter.

Mali sent emails to Salisa every day, though Salisa only managed to find time to get to the internet café to read them two or three times a week.

*Salisa!*

*How are you? I'm sorry for cluttering your inbox like this all the time. I've been spending lots of time on the internet. I've been getting so fat, Salisa, or at least that's what Bill tells me. It's because of all this Western food; you can't find anything Thai here at all. I don't want to disappoint Bill, so I've started taking long walks on the beach and doing aerobics in the lounge room. It's not like in Thailand—how often we had to walk there, everywhere! I guess you're still doing it. Here I'm stuck inside. You need an Australian license to drive, so I can't do it. I've asked Bill to teach me how to drive a car so I can get my license, but he never really has the time. I think he could find the time, but maybe he just likes having me stuck here.*

*I don't know. Tell me everything about your life! My life is so boring. Bill works all the time—he even went to the Philippines and didn't take me! He said*



*there'd be some problem with my visa if I went in and out of the country too much. Between you and me, Salisa, I think he's maybe sleeping with bargirls in the Philippines. Maybe he'll even bring one of them back here to be a second wife. Actually, I kind of hope he does bring back a second wife. The work would go twice as fast, and I would have a friend to talk to!*

*I miss you, Mali*

Salisa wrote her back right away with lots of funny stories about her co-workers in Samui and details about her life in Thailand, and Mali seemed to be in slightly better spirits when she next wrote. Salisa worried that the more positive tone was just for her benefit.

Beau did come back in July that year, during his mid-year break, and was there for Salisa's twenty-third birthday. They stayed in the same resort again, and again she charged him for nothing, let her savings suffer and got in trouble with the bar for taking more time off. Even the fines she had to pay didn't seem to appease the *mamasan*.

Salisa thought, only for a moment, about how different the birthdays she spent with Dave were. But then Beau pulled her in for a long, passionate kiss and her skin was on fire.

At the end of the two weeks, during dinner at the Samui Sea's restaurant, Beau looked out over the beach and said offhandedly that he was thinking of moving to Samui at the end of the year, when he had finished his engineering degree. Salisa almost dropped her fork in surprise.

'Really? You would move to Thailand?'

‘Yeah, of course’, he said. ‘I’ve got to see you, don’t I? I can’t keep paying for all these airfares.’ He didn’t seem like he was prepared to discuss it any further. Salisa couldn’t tell if this was something he had put any thought into, or just something he was saying for the fun of it. But after he finished his meal and they were waiting for their dessert of fried bananas in coconut milk, he started talking about it again. ‘I think there would be plenty of companies here that could use a civil engineer. To help them build all their resorts. Otherwise, you know, I don’t have to be an engineer. I saw a sign yesterday for a restaurant that was for sale in Chaweng. I think my parents would lend me the money to start a business here. I might not make that much, but you don’t need that much money to live in Thailand, do you?’

‘No, no, you don’t. It is very expensive for tourists here, but not for people who live here, not for Thai people.’ She tried not to sound too excited.

‘So there you go’, he smiled.

‘It’ll be great’, she said. ‘I can shop for all our food at the markets, we can live very cheaply in a small house. I could help you run the restaurant—you said it was in Chaweng?—if you buy it. And we could make all the money we need.’

He smiled halfway, and nodded as he watched the waitress walk towards them from the kitchen with their dessert.

‘I mean, if you’d still want to see me and everything once you were here’, she said, and made herself laugh.

‘Yeah, that sounds great’, he said, not really listening. ‘It could be really fun to run a restaurant. You know, life is so complicated in Australia. So busy, stressful. Everything is about working hard, making money. It seems so much easier here. I think I could be really happy here. With you’, he added. He gave her a big smile, and Salisa returned it. She wondered if he thought she didn’t have to work hard to make

money here. 'If I am going to move here at the end of the year, though, I won't be able to come back for another holiday during the next mid-semester break, like we planned. I'll have to save all my money and then come at the end of the year.'

'Okay, of course', Salisa agreed. 'That sounds much better anyway. I mean, you know, what's six months compared to the rest of our lives?'

'I was actually doing a bit of reading about this on the internet before I came', he said between mouthfuls. 'Maybe we could get married to make it easier. Easier for me to open a business here, I mean.'

Salisa set her fork down and wiped her mouth. 'Oh yes', she said. 'It is much easier for a *farang* who is married to a Thai woman to live in Thailand and run a business here.'

He was signing the bill to charge the dinner to his room and smiled.

'You're such a devious, cunning *farang*', she joked. 'Killing two birds with one stone, huh?'

'I'm sorry?' he asked. 'I don't follow you.'

'Nothing', she said. 'It's just nice. You can start your business and marry your girlfriend at the same time. It's a clever idea.'

'Yeah, I thought it was pretty smart', he smiled. 'Want to go back up to the room?'

She wasn't sure if she had been proposed to or not. They went upstairs and didn't talk about it for the rest of the trip. She took him to the airport on his last day. Even though she was still not happy about how he had proposed to her, if in fact he really had, she cried. He didn't seem upset to leave, which Salisa assumed was because he was coming back in six months, this time to stay. Salisa was reassured by

how calm he was and how happy he was that he would be returning. He kissed her goodbye for a long time before going through the security checkpoint.

‘I love this airport’, he said. ‘I see so much of it these days.’

‘Not for six months, you won’t’, she said.

‘And after those six months, I’ll just see it the once’, he said. ‘Then maybe never again.’ She smiled, her tears drying. ‘It’s a real shame to think of never seeing this place again’, he said. ‘It’s a real marvel of engineering. Beautiful architecture, I mean.’ He put his hands on her sides. ‘Thailand has lots of marvels of engineering, you know.’

‘So does Australia’, she said. ‘Go on. You’re going to miss your flight.’

He waved, and started towards the metal detector. ‘Cheer up’, he called back to her. ‘You only have to work your job another six months. Then you’ll be working in my restaurant!’

‘Our restaurant’, she called back, but she wasn’t sure he heard her.

She emailed Dave. *I think I got engaged!*

He emailed back: *I think congratulations? Are you sure you’re okay?*

Salisa: *Definitely! Everything is going to be fine.* For some reason, though, she didn’t want to write the news to Mali yet.

No one at the bar believed her about the engagement. Beau hadn’t given her a ring, and of course, she was still working. Several women from the bar had been engaged in the past, and their fiancés almost always stopped them from going with customers as soon as they were engaged. The women would work at the bar to earn money from drink commissions and their wages, but they didn’t sleep with any other

men. Their fiancés gave them a monthly amount to support them for the money they lost from not having sex with customers. Sometimes, these women were really in love with these men and they would be faithful. A few girls would still go with customers despite their engagement so they could earn double their normal income. They would earn as much money as they could from the engagements, because the marriages almost never went ahead. Sometimes the women called them off, sometimes the men. But very few bargirls ended up in successful marriages with *farang*. Though Salisa hadn't met anyone who had done it, the women in the bar said they knew of a few bargirls who had even been engaged to several *farang* at once.

'It's totally possible to have a real marriage with a *farang*', said Salisa, more to herself than anyone else. 'Beau's not like other *farang*. And I mean—Mali's husband is terrible, but that seems to be going well, doesn't it?'

'How is Mali?' asked one of her co-workers.

'I haven't heard from her in a while', said Salisa. 'So clearly it's going really, really well.'

Over the next six months, Salisa spent a lot more time emailing Mali. It wasn't true that she didn't get emails from Mali, as she'd said to her co-workers; Mali emailed her all the time. Certainly more than Beau did, who would maybe write back once every week or two, sometimes less often. She knew he was busy finishing the final semester of his degree and was probably busy making plans to move to Thailand. After all, it was a huge thing to do, moving to another country. But as little as she heard from Beau, she almost felt like she heard less about what was happening with Mali despite the number of emails she was receiving. Mali's emails, which had started out so full of excitement about her life with Bill, her huge house and the strangeness of Australia after a lifetime in Thailand, had devolved quickly and only

seemed to get worse. *Nothing much happening here, or just the usual this week,* things like that. A lot of meaningless chatter and not much indication of how Mali was really faring.

Salisa couldn't really picture Mali living her new life. It seemed like all she did was stay at home in Bill's huge house and take care of him, cooking and cleaning. She guessed that would be fine; at least Mali wasn't a bargirl anymore.

*I was wrong to be so critical of you before, she wrote to Mali, for falling for a man and letting him take care of you. This really is the best way out. It's not like taking charity. I really love him, and he really loves me. I can't wait for him to come back. We're going to run the best restaurant in Samui. You can even come and visit me, and we can serve drinks there together, for old time's sake, right?*

It took Mali a week to write back this time, and she never referred to what Salisa had said. She just talked about the house again.

*So much cleaning, she wrote. I keep trying to clean in a different order. If you can think of little tricks like that you can keep your brain alive. I'm even writing a novel on the computer about a Thai woman who does nothing but clean a house all day, and she hates everything about it, but eventually a whole horde of demons attack Australia—it's kind of a fantasy novel—and the thing about them is that their spaceships are powered by dust and grime, so the woman cleans all the houses in Australia and the spaceships can't function anymore, so she saves the whole country. I think I can sell it to a movie producer maybe. I'll send it to you when it's done and you can see if there are any movie producers among your customers and try to give it to them, okay?*

Salisa spent the months waiting for Beau working as usual, reading millions of virtually identical emails from Mali, and writing many emails to Beau that would go unanswered. The time dragged on.

‘I’m engaged to be married’, she told a customer one night when she’d let herself get drunk.

‘Ha ha, cheers’, said the equally drunk *farang*. ‘Your fiancé know where you are?’

‘Of course’, said Salisa. ‘We have a modern relationship, my fiancé and I. He’s not jealous at all.’

‘Lucky you’, said the customer, and he took her hand, put her bare ring finger in his mouth, and sucked on it.

## Chapter Twenty-one

In Victor Harbour, South Australia, every day was the same. Mali woke up when Bill did and made him breakfast, but then she went back to sleep until midday because she didn't have anything else to do. For a few hours every day, she would rush through the chores that Bill obviously expected her to take all day to do. She kept the house perfectly clean. She even tended to the garden, though she had never taken care of a garden before. Then she spent hours drawing pictures of plants, or birds on the beach, or just the ocean, vast and distant, in big scratchy fields of pen lines. She was getting quite a collection of pictures, stored in the desk drawer in the computer room.

Bill was gone for at least twelve hours a day, every day. Each afternoon he would call Mali to tell her what time he would return. Mali felt he did this to make sure she was at home. Though he never said so, Mali understood that this was also so she could have dinner on the table the minute he returned. She didn't mind it so much; it gave her a goal for every afternoon. After dinner, she would massage his shoulders while he spoke to her about his day, recounting the twists and turns of his complicated business relationships. At first Mali found it interesting, then she realised that he only told the same three or four basic stories—someone had screwed him over, he'd screwed over someone else, he'd thought someone had screwed him over but it turned out to be a misunderstanding, etcetera—and she figured it was easier just to agree with whatever he said and let him vent all his frustrations. She would accompany him to bed and, if he felt like it, they would have sex. This would



happen two or three nights a week, sometimes less if Bill was particularly tired. Mali felt that this at least wasn't too demanding.

Once Bill was asleep, Mali would get back up and spend hours on the internet in chat rooms and on forums. She had started out trying to find Thai women in Adelaide that she could become friends with, but with no luck. She ended up spending most of her time communicating with foreigners living in Thailand, mostly the jaded ex-pat types she knew from Bangkok. At least she didn't feel as lonely when she was messaging them. She wrote emails to Salisa, though not as many as she wanted to. She understood that Salisa's time was taken up entirely with working and sleeping. She hadn't forgotten what that life was like.

Often when Salisa wrote her back she'd include details about customers or co-workers, funny stories that could only happen in the bars. Mali would savour these, close her eyes in the dark computer room and try to imagine every detail: the bright pink lights, the smell of meat cooking on the food carts, the drinks clattering on their trays. She had never worked in the bar in Samui but she had imagined it so many times from Salisa's emails that she sometimes forgot that she hadn't worked there herself. She found herself fantasising about it. Yes, now she only had to have sex with one man, but he was in total control of her life. She couldn't go anywhere or do anything. She was trapped in his house and felt like nothing more than his housekeeper. Or his slave, depending on how bad Mali's mood was. As time went on, she felt less and less like Bill wanted a wife and more and more like he was just looking for a domestic servant who would have sex with him. Exactly as Salisa had told her from the beginning. In the darkness she dreamed about the bars for as long

as she could stand it, then she went back to bed and tried as hard as she could to get under the covers with her keeper without waking him up.

He was sending money home to her family every month. It was less than she had sent her family when she was working as a bargirl. She had initially figured that it was okay for him to give her less since she anticipated she would be working less for the money. Now she felt that she should be earning *more* than when she was a bargirl.

She missed speaking in her native tongue and hearing people speak it. She missed praying to Buddha in a temple. She missed her country and her people in a way that she never thought she would. Australia just felt like a big, empty country to her, like something that had nothing to do with her.

The worst experience for her was Bill's birthday. The day before, she received a phone call from Bill's daughter. The loud, echoing ring of the phone had frightened her, since it never rang in the middle of the day. 'Yes, hello?' she answered uncertainly, hoping it was just Bill calling earlier than usual to tell her what time he would be home.

'Hello, erm, is this Bill's ... wife?' A young woman asked.

'Yes, this is Mali.'

'Right. This is Bill's daughter, Donna. I'm calling about my dad's birthday.' She spoke very slowly, and very loudly, in the way Mali knew people did when they expected she wouldn't understand them. Mali made an effort to use her best English throughout the conversation, wanting to impress her. Donna was calling to tell Mali that she and her family, and her brother and his family would be coming over for dinner the following evening for Bill's birthday, so she should cook for ten.

‘For *ten*?’ Mali repeated.

‘Yes’, Donna replied impatiently. ‘That is how many of us there will be.’ She listed them all hastily, and Mali tried to remember their names, but she knew she would have no hope. She hadn’t heard half the names before. Bill had never spoken to her about his family and Mali had figured he didn’t see them often.

After Bill left for work the following morning, Mali didn’t go back to bed. She ransacked the kitchen trying to decide what she could make to feed ten. She searched the house for anything that might be used as birthday decorations, but found nothing. She suspected that Donna would be heartily disappointed with her efforts for dinner, but what did she expect? Mali had no notice and couldn’t go buy anything either, with no car and no shops nearby.

Bill’s family arrived in two shiny new cars before Bill was home. Mali smoothed down her dress and set her face in a calm, friendly expression ready to answer the door. But it didn’t really matter what her face looked like, no one stopped to look at it. The large group of four adults and four children just barrelled through the door and into the house. The children yelled their greetings and ran straight for the television. Both women gave her small, half-hearted smiles as they entered. Both men looked her up and down, slowly, in the way men did in the bars when they were choosing a woman to have sex with that night. Mali held back a small gag.

They had brought a birthday cake, wine and various other things that they handed to Mali, leaving her to sort everything out, which she did, alone in the kitchen, as slowly as she could. By the time she was ready to go back out, Bill had arrived home. He was in the lounge room expressing his surprise that his family had come all the way to see him on his birthday. ‘Thank goodness’, Mali thought to herself, but she soon realised that his presence wasn’t going to make anything easier.

First, Bill put his arm around Mali and introduced her to everyone. Mali felt proud for a moment. But as she stood there being introduced to Donna, she realised something she hadn't thought about fully before: Donna was about the same age as her. For the first time this really struck her: Bill was literally old enough to be her father. Maybe even her *grandfather*, really. She thought she had grown used to drinking wine, which initially she had hated, but something about it suddenly felt disgusting in her stomach as she stood there and thought about this man whose daughter was the same age as her.

They sat down to eat the dinner that Mali had slaved over all day, and no one thanked her. 'Oh, Mali will take care of that', Bill said, every time anyone requested anything. Mali was up and down from the table all night. She thought it would be easier if she stayed standing, like a waitress, since she was being treated as one. At one point, she eyed the strawberry wine Donna had brought and wondered if she should drink it. Going into anaphylactic shock should get their attention. What would Bill's face look like? Would she see genuine concern? Love? He probably didn't even know she was allergic to strawberries.

Bill's son, Nigel, made polite conversation with Mali. At first she appreciated this—at least someone was treating her like a human—but then she noticed the way his eyes were moving over her body. The way he looked at her made Mali sick. Sicker. Donna, and Nigel's wife, whose name Mali didn't catch, just ignored her, with the exception of Donna's requests that Mali bring them something, or take something away, using slow, loud, poor English as if Mali spoke virtually no English at all. Donna's husband was just as bad as Nigel, staring at her all evening, but better at hiding it. Either of those men would have had sex with her in the garage while their family was eating dinner if given the chance. That idea made her smile, but only

a bitter, little smile. It was her only real smile of the evening, until everyone was leaving. Hanging back from the others as they said goodbye to Bill in the driveway, Nigel's wife whispered: 'I'm so sorry, Mali.'

'What is there to be sorry about?' Mali smiled back, teeth gritted. 'It was very nice to meet you all.'

'I'm sorry that, I don't know. That this family is kind of ... racist. And Donna is really angry at her father, but not at you. I'm sure things will get better.' She made herself match Mali's smile. 'We'll have another dinner party soon and that'll be much more pleasant, won't it?' She squeezed Mali's hand and gave an apologetic shrug before leaving. Mali just stared after her.

In December 2009, Bill was gone, in the Philippines again. She sat on the couch in the living room—Bill didn't like her to do it, since the couch was very nice and he was against anyone sitting on it, but she always did when he was out—and she thought about whether he was sleeping with some bargirl, somewhere over the sea. She thought about whether she minded if he was, and realised, all of a sudden, that she was completely indifferent to the thought of it.

To calm her nerves, she decided she would have a glass of wine. She had always hated wine, but it was virtually all Bill drank now that he was back home and Mali had grown to almost like it. But there was no wine in the kitchen.

Bill had hired a car to take him to the airport, as he always did. Frustrated for the one millionth time that she felt like a prisoner, Mali took the spare keys to Bill's car and jumped in. She could find a liquor store somewhere in the town. She could even just go to a bar if she wanted. She knew bars. She could make friends there. It would be wonderful.

She drove carefully out of the driveway and down the hill in front of their house, towards the main street. She had driven a jeep a few times before with customers in Phuket, but not many times. She could drive a scooter, but it wasn't the same. She made it to the liquor store shakily and bought three bottles of cheap white wine, the kind Bill never bought. She thought about going back home, then she kept driving.

A cat ran across the road as she made a turn. Cursing in Thai, she swerved violently and crashed the car into a stobey pole. She was only driving about thirty kilometres an hour so she wasn't hurt, but it managed to make a pretty significant dent in the front of Bill's silver BMW. Mali crinkled her nose up as she inspected the damage, then hopped back in to the car before anyone drove past and saw her.

She increased the pace of her swearing in Thai as she reversed the car and made it back to the house. She stowed it securely in the garage and rushed inside to drink the first bottle of wine. That evening, she built up Bill's reaction in her mind until she was sure he would kill her. He wouldn't believe her that this was the first time she had taken the car. He would think she was lying to him, that she always took the car out whenever he was on his business trips. He would think she was cheating on him. 'I wish I was cheating on him', she said aloud to the empty house that she knew every inch of, by now. She fell asleep on the couch, drunk, not knowing that Salisa was doing exactly the same thing.

## Chapter Twenty-two

It has been over a week since Khwan's kidnapping. We have checked in with Justin and AAPTT every morning and picked up more flyers. They made us proper ones with information on them. They say 'MISSING' across the top in English and Thai and have the same photo of Khwan we used on the first night we went out looking. Underneath, it says 'REWARD' and gives all of AAPTT's contact details.

We spend all day, every day, and most nights walking around every part of Bangkok. Most days, Justin comes with us. At night-time he goes into closed brothels, looking for Khwan. I wonder if he ever has sex with the women in the brothels, since he is posing as a customer, and he did go into the Spicy Mango in Phuket when he was on holidays, although Salisa told me he said at the time he didn't think it was a bar with sex workers when he went into it, not until Khwan mentioned it to him. That did strike me as a bit of bullshit. How he could confuse a go-go bar full of prostitutes with a quiet place for a drink with no sex on offer, I have no idea. But he does seem like a really nice guy and he is obviously vehemently against prostitution, working all this time to fight it. I think he is developing a crush on Mali, which she ignores.

Dave has been sleeping on the couch in Salisa and Mali's room. He comes with us everywhere, following Salisa around like a little puppy dog. I can't see how she doesn't know he is totally in love with her. From Salisa's story, they seemed like they were very close and I could tell he loved and respected her. I thought he had been interested in her romantically originally, but seemed to have given up by the time he visited her in Phuket. But now that I've met him, I see that he is completely

devoted to her. He must have been all these years, since they first met, seven and a half years ago. Salisa obviously has more important things on her mind, but Mali and I talk about it, sometimes.

‘She has always said she only thinks of him as a friend, mainly ... And now, a lot of terrible things have happened, you know’, Mali says. ‘She doesn’t like to think about finding someone to love anymore. Neither of us do.’

‘Justin has a crush on you’, I say.

‘How nice for Justin’, she smiles.

‘Salisa and Dave could get together’, I say. ‘Salisa could stop working as a bargirl. You both have to do *something* to get out permanently, don’t you?’

‘We are doing something’, Mali said. ‘We’re saving. We’re working.’ She says it a little defensively, like she knows it probably isn’t enough. I don’t want to bring the subject up again.

Every day is the same. We look and we look, and we find nothing. No leads. We have asked everyone, every day, up and down the street in front of the hotel, but no one other than Ting saw what happened. Ting didn’t see the license plate and she couldn’t give enough of a description for the police to try to locate the car.

I am terrified that Khwan has been sold as a sex slave and has already been sent to another country. It’s common practice. If the woman is alone in a foreign country, especially one with a language she doesn’t know, it is less likely she will be able to escape. And if she does, without her passport and with no one to help her, she has nowhere to go. The women are told that they would be arrested for illegal immigration if they went to the police. But everyone seems to be functioning under the firm belief that Khwan is currently located in a closed brothel somewhere in Bangkok. I think they believe that because if it isn’t true, there is nothing we can do.



The next morning when we arrive at the APTT office, there's news. 'One of our guys has found a girl matching Khwan's description in a closed brothel', Pakpao says. 'He has seen all of the photos you have given us of Khwan, and he says he thinks it is her. But it is not for certain. Her face is ... bruised.'

'You have found her?' Salisa asks, in a small voice.

'We believe we have found her, yes.'

'When can we go get her? How do we get her out?' Salisa asks. 'Tell us where it is, right away!'

'Easy', says Pakpao. 'These places are like prisons. They have armed guards. They have locked doors and bars on the windows. The place where we think Khwan is—it's a particularly difficult case. We can't get just Khwan out.'

'What do you mean we can't get her out?' demands Salisa. 'This is what we've been waiting for! Can't you do anything?'

'You misheard me', says Pakpao. 'We can't get *just* Khwan out. We have to do a raid.'

'A raid?' we all ask.

'It will take a few days to organise. We need to find some police who are willing to work with us, to shut this brothel down. We have evidence now that this business is a closed brothel, involved in kidnapping and other crimes. We need to use our connections and call in some favours. Once we have some police who will agree to shut it down and make arrests, there is another group we need to coordinate with.'

'Another group?'

‘Yes, they are called Under the Radar. They are a group of foreigners who are mostly ex-military or ex-police. A non-profit, humanitarian group. Most of them are Australian.’

‘Everyone is Australian’, Salisa grumbles. Dave and I look at each other, not knowing why we feel guilty.

‘Under the Radar organises raids on brothels to save girls who have been kidnapped or sold’, continues Pakpao. ‘They place them in children’s rescue homes in villages outside Bangkok to be looked after. Most of the girls they save are underage.’

‘Why do you need them if you have the police?’

‘We don’t have the full support of the police. We need to be able to supply our own fire power to pull this off.’

‘Okay’, says Salisa, getting to her feet. ‘So when?’

‘Go back to your hotel and rest’, says Pakpao. ‘Stop handing out the flyers for a few days. I will get in touch when we have organised the police and Under the Radar.’

‘A few days’, says Salisa. ‘It’s been weeks!’

‘We’re lucky to have found her at all’, says Pakpao. ‘And we’re not even sure it’s her, yet. Remember that.’

Salisa sits back down. ‘I want to be there’, she says.

‘No, it is too dangerous. Salisa and Mali, you will need to stay away. But, actually, Lara and Dave, if you agree, it will be best if you are there. Having you involved means the police have to take this more seriously. The government does not like this kind of thing to be in the media. The foreign press, if it is to say anything about prostitution in Thailand, should be saying that the government and the police

are closing down a brothel. No one wants it to say that the police are ignoring one. With you there, the government will have to do its job. Justin can't go. We can't use anyone who goes undercover into the brothels.'

In the taxi back to the hotel, Salisa sits next to me. She looks me in the eye. 'I can't be there', she says. 'You can.'

'I'm sorry', I say.

'Don't be', she says. 'Just get her for me.'

'I will', I say. 'If I can.'

'You can and you will', Salisa says. The taxi creeps forward, the driver honking and cursing at the traffic in the crowded road. 'You'll have a lot to write about in this book you're researching for', Salisa says darkly.

'I don't care about my book right now', I say to her.

We all spend a couple of days feeling useless. I type up some of my research and call Aidan. He has calmed down a lot since all we have been doing is handing out flyers, and he was very reassured when Dave arrived, which I found infuriatingly sexist, but I let it go. Now he is agitated and worried again when I tell him about the raid. I decide not to tell him that I will be there. I say Dave is going, which doesn't bother him at all. Salisa and Mali start cleaning the hotel rooms so there is nothing for the cleaners to do when they come. Dave drags us out of the hotel a few times, even if it is just to walk around a shopping mall. He is trying to keep our spirits up.

A few nights later, nearly two weeks now after we first arrived in Bangkok, we get a call from Pakpao. The raid is happening the next morning. She gives Dave

and me our instructions: get there early, at seven in the morning. Go to such and such a place. Stay out of the way. We agree. That night, no one eats dinner.

When we get back to the hotel, Salisa asks to borrow my laptop. 'I want to write a letter to Khwan', she says.

'Okay', I say, and hand it to her.

She takes it and looks at me. 'She can read it when you rescue her tomorrow.'

'Okay', I say.

In the morning, I get ready for the raid and go next door to their room to get Dave. Salisa is sitting at the desk, asleep, the laptop in front of her, its screen full of writing.

The building Dave and I have been told to sit in is a small restaurant. It is a restaurant for Thai locals, not one for tourists, so we look a little out of place. Once there, as instructed, we call the police officer in charge and tell him what we see. 'Good', he says. 'Don't move from there. Keep telling us what's happening.' I hang up.

'We're supposed to stay here', I tell Dave. 'We're supposed to report on what's happening. We're not supposed to get involved.'

'We are involved', says Dave. 'We're the *farang* on duty. We're making sure everyone does their job.'

We sit and drink our bottles of water and stare at the plates of food we ordered to look less out of place. I poke at the rice. 'What if we don't get her out', I say. 'What if it isn't her?'

'I don't want to think about that', he says. 'It'll destroy Sassy completely.'

'You love her, don't you?' I ask.

He smiles and looks at my rice. 'I'm just a friend.' He blushes.

'But you don't have a girlfriend at home? A wife? You're about twenty-nine, right? Nearly thirty?' I know I'm getting too personal.

Dave is too distracted and anxious to notice. He just answers. 'I haven't had another girlfriend since I met Salisa. Not really. Nothing serious, nothing that has worked out. No one measures up.'

'To Salisa?'

'Yes, to Salisa. Actually—' He looks around, up and down the street. I think I see him realising what I still find hard to believe. We are sitting in a street somewhere in the middle of Bangkok, waiting to watch a brothel being raided by the only trustworthy police available and a clandestine group of Australian militants, all to hopefully rescue Salisa's teenage sister who has been kidnapped. It is surreal. So he just starts talking. 'I've loved her since the day I met her. Everything I've done since then, really, has been for her. I've learnt Thai. Built a house. I'm going to pay it off before I'm thirty so I can rent it out and it'll be all profit. I've built a business that I can run from Thailand, so I can live here, with her, and still have an income to support us, since I know she won't move to Australia. I already kind of asked her that, a while back. I'm just waiting.'

'Waiting for what?'

'For Sassy to realise she loves me.' He grins, forgetting where we are for a moment, thinking of her.

'Dave', I say, and I lean closer. 'You can get her out of this. This life. Why haven't you already?'

He sighs and looks across the road at the building that looks like all the others, but has a brothel inside. 'She wants to get herself out of this life', he says.

Over the next half an hour, we see more and more people we recognise from the AAPTT office and other muscular, Australian-looking individuals we assume to be from Under the Radar coming into the street and surrounding the building, trying to look like they are supposed to be there.

Then, there is a signal that neither Dave nor I see or hear. Everyone converges at once, guns out. We see the door being broken down by two police with a compact battering ram and people rush in, pointing their guns ahead of them. The same thing is happening at the back of the building.

There are shots. Dave and I jump out of our seats at once, then freeze. I feel like I should be moving, but there is nowhere I can go. 'We've got to stay here', Dave says, seeing me itching to move. 'No matter what, we've got to stay here. We've got to see everything.'

But there is nothing to see now. Everyone is inside. Then, seconds later, people start running out of the building. There are men from our group holding young women and girls by their shoulders, pushing them outside and down the street, into a building at the end of the street that they must have cleared out earlier.

One very young-looking girl runs out of the door completely naked. She is screaming, and she has blood on the side of her face. She pauses outside the front of the building, not knowing where to go. She is very close to me. She is very young. The blood is running down her face, bright red on her pale skin, and she is real. All of the things I've come to Thailand to research are more real and more terrible than I could ever have imagined.

I'm grabbing the plastic tablecloth from our table and running towards her. Dave yells at me to stop, but I know he is running after me. I cover the girl in the tablecloth and, mimicking the men I saw earlier, I grab her by the shoulders and tell

her to come with me, in English. Frozen in place, she looks at me and I know she hasn't understood. But I begin to run, and she starts running with me.

I take her down the street and into the building I saw the men take the other girls into. Guns are pointed at me as I enter. When they recognise me, they grab me and the girl and shove both of us towards the back of the room. Dave, following behind, gets the same treatment.

In just minutes, it is over. A van tears down the street and stops in front of the brothel. The police take about six men and two quite elderly ladies, handcuffed, from inside the building and put them in the van. A few minutes later, more vans arrive for the women and girls from the brothel. I know they are being taken to a shelter and that they will be taken care of. There are about twenty of them.

Two of the women break away and run down the street. 'They're running away', I shout. 'We have to stop them!' The police ignore me, which I can't believe. 'Don't you care about them?' I shout. 'We have to help them!' No one goes after them, so I do. I'm running down the street after the fleeing women. I catch up to one of them and put my hand on her shoulder. 'Wait, we want to help', I say to her. 'Please let us help you.'

She turns around and I see her fist coming towards me, but I'm so surprised I don't even try to move out of its way, like I've been taught. She punches me hard in the eye, and I stumble backwards. The pain is sharp, then a strong dull sting. I can see her running down the street as I slump down on the ground and start to close my eyes in pain. I've never been hit before. When we spar in kickboxing class, we wear pads.

Dave grabs me up. One of the military type Australians is with him. 'What the hell?' Dave says.

‘I don’t understand’, I say; my eye is tearing up. I use the back of my hand to wipe at the tears and when I pull it away, I see blood. Wow, she hit hard. The military guy, having figured out that I’m pretty much okay, is about to leave. I put my hand on his shoulder. ‘I don’t understand’, I say again. ‘Why did she hit me?’

‘She just got away from a bunch of guys with guns’, he says. ‘You think she wants to go with us now? You think she wants to go with anyone? You think she wants to go with a *farang*? With you?’ And he’s gone.

Dave puts his arm around me and asks if I can walk. I think I can. I’m bleeding some, I’m dizzy and my head feels disgusting, but I’m okay. I’m pretty sure some people just got killed in that building, and the women who just ran out of it and are being loaded into the van to be taken to a shelter have been kept as sex slaves for God knows how long. I am a lucky Westerner who just has a sore face.

And yet I’m crying. It’s true, what I did counted. This brothel is closed. I did my part. I did something. I was a *farang* who sat in a restaurant and waited and made sure the government did their job.

But tomorrow someone else will open a new brothel. The next day two more will spring up, five more, ten, dozens. More girls will be kidnapped, just like Khwan. I’m just one Westerner. Who knows how many Westerners it would take to stop all of the brothels, I think sarcastically, knowing no amount of Westerners would ever stop what is happening to this country, to these women. The change has to come from Thailand itself, the Thai people themselves.

But I think of myself running across the street, guns firing around me, to cover the naked girl with a tablecloth. Somehow I can’t feel completely terrible when I think about that. I did do something.



Dave takes me to the hospital to see if my cut needs stitches. We think the woman who punched me was wearing a ring. We are seen quickly but we are impatient anyway, wanting to get back to the office to find out if Khwan was one of the girls rescued. They were all put in the back of the van before we could find out if she was there. Dave had messaged Salisa that we were at the hospital and the last he heard from her, she was at AAPTT finding out about Khwan.

But when taking the lift down to the ground floor to leave, we find Salisa and Mali in the hospital lobby waiting for us. Salisa's face is ashen. As soon as she sees us, she stands up to leave. 'One of the girls they rescued looks like Khwan', Mali whispers to us. 'But it's not Khwan.' She frowns at the bandage above my eye. No stitches. 'Are you okay?' I nod; I'm not thinking much about my cut right now.

Dave walks up to Salisa. Salisa is staring at the floor. She starts to wail. Dave puts his arms around her and holds her as her legs start to give out and she is hanging over the hospital floor, in Dave's arms.

We all leave without saying anything.

## Chapter Twenty-three

In mid-November 2009, after months of waiting and working at the bar in Samui, Salisa received an email. It was probably the longest she had ever received from Beau.

*Dear Salisa,*

*So the time has come at last! I'm going to sit my university exams, and two weeks after that, I'll be done with university forever, and you know what comes next, right?*

*So here's what I think: you should quit your job. You won't need to have it any more once I get my bar up and running, anyway. Instead, I think you should track down a house for us to live in. Who needs hotels anymore, right? I've been looking on the internet and I have a pretty specific idea of the house we should live in. It'd be best if we could get a two or three bedroom house that's close to the beach and not too far from either Chaweng or Lamai. Thai style, of course, one of those awesome looking traditional bungalows. And we should get all the utilities included, of course, and it's got to be furnished. I can't bring anything from Australia really, except clothes and personal items.*

*Think you can do all of that? And think you can do it all for less than twenty thousand baht a month? I've seen houses advertised on the internet at thirty or forty thousand baht per month, or more, but that has to be, you know, the sucker farang rate. I'll bet you could rent a house cheaper, since you're Thai, and they trust you.*

*You're smart, Salisa. You'll be able to figure all of this out, I know it! Let me know what's up and when you've got something together. I've got to get back to studying, but remember: just two weeks!*

*Love, Beau*

'I know I'm smart', she smirked aloud to the computer screen, knowing he was patronising her, but the email said two weeks, so she couldn't feel too bad about anything.

She needed to quit her job, find them a house and start researching businesses that were for sale. In several other quick emails, Beau dictated a bunch of other instructions to her. He wanted her to buy him a decent mobile phone and SIM card, since he threw the cheap ones away at the end of each holiday, and organise the internet connection and everything so the house was ready for him to move into straight away. Salisa would need to be living in it herself for about a week before Beau's arrival so she could get everything ready for him.

He didn't mention sending her any money to pay for any of this, but Salisa had enough savings to cover all of it. And once he arrived, he would start taking care of her, she was sure. It wouldn't be too long until the business was up and running and she was earning her keep.

She threw herself into the project; she quit her job that very day. The girls organised a party for her that lasted fifteen minutes, then they went back to work. She watched them scatter across the bar, getting the drinks ready, their eyes roving for the evening's first customers. She would never be one of them again.

There was no way Salisa could get the kind of house Beau had described for the rent he wanted to pay. Not if it had to be close to the beach. She found a small

one bedroom near the beach, about fifteen minutes outside of Lamai, for twenty-five thousand baht per month. Rent would be cheaper if she signed a one-year lease, but there was no chance of that; she'd be clearing out the bulk of her savings already just paying the first month and doing everything else Beau wanted her to do. She worked out a deal over several heated meetings with the landlord—Beau had said she'd get a good deal because she was Thai, but in fact she just got a good deal because she was Salisa—and for four weeks, the house was hers. If Beau liked it, they could sign the lease in both their names, and it would be theirs forever. She spent the next week busily fulfilling the rest of Beau's requests, and spending all of her savings in the meantime.

She loved the house she found and she was so proud the day she moved in, a week before she was expecting Beau. The first night she stayed there, sleeping on the soft mattress on the king-size bed, she realised this place would be the first she ever lived where she slept in a real Western bed, rather than on a mat or a mattress on the floor. While she smiled at the thought, she still tossed and turned for hours. The mattress was so soft she couldn't relax on it. She ended up putting some couch cushions on the floor and sleeping on them for the first few nights, since they weren't as soft, before she told herself she would have to get used to sleeping in the bed. It's not like Beau would be okay with couch cushions on the floor.

She was so busy she didn't obsess over the fact that Beau hadn't emailed her since he had given her all the instructions, and he hadn't replied to any of her emails asking for more information about some of the things that he had requested, or asking if he was happy with the house she had rented. She worried about it, some, but she knew he was busy, too. He was finishing his university exams, after all.

When the first week of December ended and Salisa hadn't heard from him, she started to panic in earnest. She had been in the house two weeks already. She had been expecting him a week ago. She had been emailing him several times a day, but never received a reply. He had never given her a mobile number in Australia to call him on.

Salisa texted Dave to tell him what was going on, and that she was worried something had happened to Beau. And maybe to Mali, too, since she hadn't heard from her either.

Dave replied to her text right away. *What's Beau's full name?* he wrote. *Do you know his address? What university does he go to?*

She called him instead of texting. 'I'm terrified, Dave', she said.

'Don't be terrified', Dave said. 'I'm on it.'

She sat down on the tiled verandah out the front of her house—and Beau's house; it was still Beau's house as well, as soon as he came—and she crossed her legs. She looked out into the palm trees surrounding the house, and listened to the waves from the beach, only a few minutes' walk away. She leaned against one of the two chairs on the balcony. She wanted the first time she sat in one of them to be when she was sitting there next to Beau, relaxing in the afternoon.

Two hours later, her phone rang. She jumped up and pounced on it, grabbing it from the little table. 'Beau, honey?'

'It's me', said Dave. He sounded upset.

'Oh, sorry', giggled Salisa hysterically. 'What did you find out? Where's Beau?'

He paused for so long Salisa thought they had been cut off. 'Hello? Hello, Dave?'

‘Yeah, yeah, I’m here.’ He still didn’t say anything.

Salisa sat back down on the floor quickly and everything rushed in on her. She saw black at the edge of her eyes, like she was about to faint. ‘He’s dead, isn’t he? Beau’s dead.’ The darkness receded and she felt dizzy. Her mouth went dry.

‘What? No, no, he’s not *dead*.’ Dave muttered something under his breath that Salisa couldn’t hear.

‘Oh thank God!’ Salisa said. ‘He’s okay! He is still coming! Did he tell you when he is coming? You should see the house I found for us—’

‘He’s not coming. I’m sorry, Salisa. I really am. But he’s not coming.’

She went silent and heard the sound of the ocean crashing.

‘He said he was glad I called, the bastard, because he didn’t know how to tell you himself. That’s why he hasn’t emailed or anything.’ He took a deep breath. ‘He just said that he made a mistake and that it was a really lovely dream but that in reality he has to get a job and stay and live in the real world. That’s all he said.’

‘Real world? Thailand isn’t the real world?’

‘Not for him, Sassy. Some people from Australia and other rich countries, they go to Thailand on holiday and it’s like this incredible paradise for them. They don’t know what it’s like to really live there. They don’t know what it’s like for the Thai people, like you, who grew up there. It’s just all fun and games for them. I think he wanted to come and live with you like he was on holidays forever. But he can’t.’ His tone softened. ‘It was too hard for him, to actually move away from his country. It’s not something everyone is devoted enough to do.’

Salisa sat on the floor with the mobile hanging loosely in her hand. ‘It isn’t like that’, she said finally. ‘You’re lying. You hate Beau for some reason. You don’t know anything about him at all.’

‘Salisa’, Dave said, and suddenly she could hear some strange emotion in his voice. ‘How long have we known each other? Since you were seventeen, right? How many years is that? Do you think I’d lie to you about this? Do you think I would tell you something that isn’t true, like this piece of ...’ He stopped speaking.

She could hear him breathing over the phone. She took a deep breath as well. ‘Thank you, Dave’, she said, quietly. ‘I’m okay. I’m just going to lie down.’ She put her mobile down on the ground but forgot to hang it up. She walked to one of the chairs she’d been waiting to relax on with Beau. Quickly, without thinking much about it, she let herself sink into it. She was staring at the ocean, sitting in the chair that would have been Beau’s, on the verandah of the house that would have been his, that the last of her savings had been used to pay for. As loud as she could, she started to scream to the ocean until her voice gave out. Then, the mobile still on the ground and Dave’s voice almost inaudible in its receiver, she went inside without closing the door behind her and lay down on the couch.

It had been mid-afternoon when Dave had phoned. When Salisa woke up again, it was still light and, at first, she thought she had only been asleep for a few hours. Her mobile was still on the balcony. She walked out to get it and its clock said eight a.m. She had slept for about seventeen hours. She put the phone down without checking for any missed calls or texts. She knew Beau wasn’t going to try to contact her, so there was no point in looking.

She sat down on the verandah again and looked out at the palm trees. Then she went back inside to fetch the bottle of champagne that she had bought to drink with Beau, to celebrate his arrival. She drank it on her own in a couple of hours, and went back to the couch to lie down. This time, when she woke up, it was dark. Her

phone told her it was eleven p.m. As she was looking at it, she felt the phone vibrate; Dave was texting her again. She closed her eyes tight and put it down.

Salisa's phone told her it had been three days since she found out that Beau wasn't coming. She had spent them sleeping and drinking. She hadn't eaten. She wasn't feeling well. When she woke to hear a banging at the door, she thought she was dreaming it. 'Beau', she slurred, and slouched to the door.

Mali was waiting there. 'It's okay, I'm home', she said. She dropped her bags and threw her arms around Salisa. 'It's going to be okay.' She practically had to carry Salisa inside. It felt like there was no life left in her body. She smelt like she hadn't showered in days and the whole house reeked of alcohol, some of which was open in bottles discarded around the lounge room.

'Sorry about the mess', Salisa grumbled.

'Oh, I'm sick of clean places anyway', Mali said, and held her friend tighter.



## Chapter Twenty-four

Now they were together again in Samui, Mali looked after Salisa like she was her child. The first thing she did was shower her, wash her hair and dress her in clean clothes. In the closet in the main bedroom, Mali found clothes from Robinson like the ones she had bought when she was trying to make sure she didn't look like a bargirl for Bill. She guessed Salisa was trying to do the same thing for Beau. She ignored them and dressed Salisa in the kind of clothes she would normally wear when she wasn't working. A tight pink fake Ed Hardy t-shirt with glitter and a pair of comfortable jeans. She sat her on the couch and Salisa watched while Mali cleaned the house as quickly as she could, and hunted through the kitchen to make them a Thai meal.

Mali put a bowl of green curry in front of her friend and urged her to eat. Salisa didn't need much encouragement. Now that Mali was with her, she felt she could eat again. 'What are you doing here?' she asked.

'Dave called me', said Mali. 'He couldn't get through to you and he thought you might pick up if it was me.'

'Dave called me?' Salisa asked, and then her face went white. She checked the mobile and saw the dozens of missed calls and texts: most from Dave, the last few from Mali.

'He wanted to come here to find you', Mali said.

'Why didn't he come?' asked Salisa.

Mali laughed, then made a playful scowl. 'Why so worried that Dave isn't here? I'm here! Aren't I enough?' She looked at Salisa and the playful scowl

disappeared; something she saw in Salisa's face made her smile. 'Don't worry', she said gently. 'Dave's still coming for you, at the end of the week. I told him I could get here faster, so I'm here first. And I'm staying.'

'But you're ...' She had been about to say the word *married*. She swallowed. 'What about Bill?'

'What about Bill? I'm back for good', Mali said. 'Dave said he'd pay for me to fly here. And I destroyed Bill's car, so I thought I might as well destroy the rest of his life, too.' She started laughing uncontrollably. 'He'll have to clean everything himself now', she laughed. 'It'll be a real learning experience for him.' She kept laughing and laughing, and soon Salisa was laughing too. That night, both of them fell asleep on the couch cushions on the floor and let the mosquitoes come in through the open windows, so they could hear the ocean wind.

Dave arrived at the end of Salisa's third week in the house, and stayed for four days, giving Mali a bit of a break. Salisa was completely depressed, had no job, and her savings were totally gone, and if Mali didn't cook for her she wouldn't eat. With Dave around, Mali cooked for all three of them, but at least Dave could force Salisa to get out of the house. They walked along the beach together and sat for hours on the balcony, staring at the palms. Salisa never sat in the chairs and Mali and Dave would sit on the floor with her.

'How did this happen?' Salisa asked.

'I don't know', Dave said, sitting next to her.

'I never wanted to be in a relationship with a *farang*', she said, not looking at Dave. 'I never wanted to be in a relationship with a Thai man either. I never wanted to be in a relationship with anyone.'

Dave sat quietly and looked at the water. 'He was charming, I guess', Dave said.

'He was a total pile of shit', said Salisa.

Dave smiled. 'I think you're getting better, Sassy', he said.

'No, I'm miserable', said Salisa. 'I've decided to be miserable for a whole year. Then I'll think of something else to do.'

'Okay, Sassy', said Dave. 'That sounds fine.'

'You always call me Sassy', said Salisa. 'I was seventeen when you made up that name. I'm a grown woman now. You should call me by my proper name.'

Dave smiled and didn't say anything.

After a few days, Dave had to leave to go back to work, and it was just Mali and Salisa again. They had only three more days until they had to leave the house, and they made the most of it. They slothd around the expensive Western house and ate everything in the kitchen, even the Western food they hated. They drank all the alcohol.

'We're complete failures', Salisa announced one night, when they were drunk.

'Total failures', agreed Mali. 'I'm in hiding from my husband. He probably thinks I'm in my village somewhere, pushing a plough. It's very good that he never bothered to remember the name of it.'

'You at least have savings', Salisa said. 'I don't have anything. I quit my job. I just have the money Dave hid in my closet because I said I wouldn't let him give me any money.' She smiled at this.

'I quit my job too', Mali said, 'if you don't remember. I thought I was done with working in the bars.'

‘I thought I was too’, Salisa said quietly.

‘We’ve been working in the bars for a very long time’, said Mali.

They sat there staring at the bottle of liquor until Salisa finally reached forward and poured both of them another glass. ‘It was nice while it lasted’, Salisa said. ‘Not having to—to go with customers.’

‘I missed it’, said Mali dreamily. ‘Not the customers. Just all of it.’

Salisa giggled. ‘You’re so stupid’, she said.

They drank and they sat at the table and they watched the clock move on.

‘How are we going to escape?’ Mali asked.

‘I don’t know’, said Salisa. ‘Maybe we can’t escape. Maybe only people like Khwan can escape, by never getting trapped to begin with. Maybe that’s the only hope for things.’

‘How is Khwan going to pay for school?’ Mali said, suddenly turning pale.

Salisa was silent. ‘Beau was going to run a restaurant’, she said finally. ‘I guess he only talked about it once or twice, but I got into it. I read all about how to do it.’

‘I read a lot of business books as well’, said Mali. ‘You used to make fun of me for it, if I remember.’

‘I did, I did’, giggled Salisa. ‘I remember.’

‘Between us, we probably know more about business than any other bargirl in all of Thailand’, Mali said. ‘All we need is money, and we could run the greatest restaurant any *farang* has ever seen.’

‘That’s true’, Salisa said. She reached across the table and grabbed Mali’s wrist. ‘We’re the smartest bargirls in Thailand.’

‘So we should stick together’, Mali said.

‘So we should stick together’, Salisa agreed.

When it was time to go back to work, they decided on a smaller bar this time, one that would let them keep to themselves and not have to fight with anyone for customers, because they knew they needed to earn a lot.

They found out about a room for rent above a massage parlour from one of the bargirls at their new bar and agreed to pay the rent without even seeing it because it was very cheap. On their last night in the Western house, they bought one last bottle of whisky and toasted each other with it. ‘Back in business’, Salisa announced.

‘For now’, Mali said. ‘For as short a time as possible.’

The next day, they carted their belongings up to the room above the massage parlour and went to work at the Happy Nights bar, where I met them.

From there, nothing much happened to them until I came into the picture, a year later in 2010, or at least nothing they’ve told me about. They worked. They saved. When they weren’t too tired from working, they planned the restaurant they’d open one day. They kept going. And Salisa kept sending money home to Khwan.

In February 2010, Khwan finished her last year of high school. She was turning seventeen the next month. She had been emailing and calling Salisa every day for the last few weeks, and Salisa was helping her plan what to do next. The final decision was that Khwan would move to Bangkok to go to Bangkok University and study a Bachelor of Arts in Tourism and Hotel Management when the first semester started in June. Khwan would also find part-time work in a hotel to gain experience and earn some money to help with her tuition and living expenses.

Khwan took the bus to Bangkok from Chiang Mai with her cousin Dao the day after she finished school. She was young and beautiful, and she had studied English diligently for years at Salisa's insistence. She quickly found a part-time job at the Blossom Inn.

Khwan was proud of her job, but not as proud as Salisa was of her. Khwan called her sister as soon as she stepped out of the hotel to tell Salisa she had found a job at a four-star hotel. They were both overjoyed.

Salisa emailed Dave the good news. *We did it!* she wrote. *Khwan did it! I'm so proud of her, Dave. She escaped the life our parents wanted her to have in the bars, and sleeping with strange men, and all the horrible things Mali and I put up with every day. If she can do it, Dave, anyone can. Maybe it isn't even too late for Mali and me.*

## Chapter Twenty-five

On the way back to the hotel from the hospital, nobody speaks. I am sitting in the front passenger seat of the taxi and I turn to look at Dave, Salisa and Mali in the back. Fat tears are sliding down Mali's face but she is turned towards the window, like she doesn't want Salisa to see. Salisa is sitting in the middle, staring straight ahead at the road with a blank expression. Dave is holding her hand. He is watching her, looking like he is waiting for a sign that he should say or do something more to comfort her. I don't think he is going to get it. I think I know what everyone is thinking, because I am thinking it also. We aren't going to find her. It's too late.

In the elevator on the way up to our rooms, Salisa's phone rings. At first, I think she is going to ignore it. She isn't expecting good news anymore. But she fishes for it in her pocket and glances at the screen. She doesn't say anything. Usually, she announces who is calling her, so she mustn't recognise the number. She answers it in English, so used to speaking in English around Dave and me.

'Hello?' A pause. Then, she drops Dave's hand and turns to him like she has just been slapped in the face. '*Khwan?*'

We all turn to her. The elevator doors open but we don't move. They close again and the elevator goes back down. We are still waiting to hear what comes next. Salisa is listening. Then she says one quick sentence in Thai and snaps the phone shut, still staring, shocked. The elevator doors open in the lobby again and she springs out and runs for the door. She is screaming at us to follow her.

'We are going to the hospital. Khwan is in the hospital!'

I can't tell from her reaction if she has just been given good news or bad. We all sprint after her. Our taxi is still on the side of the road where it left us. The driver is talking on his mobile phone. Salisa jumps in and screeches at him to take us to Rajavithi Hospital. We all slam our doors and the driver, a little stunned, hangs up his phone and speeds off, responding to the urgency in Salisa's voice.

We are all seated in the same positions, with Salisa in the centre of us all. None of us have seatbelts on and we are all facing her, waiting for her to tell us what she heard on the phone.

'Well?' says Mali. 'Who was that? Was it Khwan? Is she okay?'

'It wasn't Khwan, it was a nurse, but yes! She is okay! Well, she is hurt, but she is okay. She is going to be okay.' Everyone starts talking at once, asking questions that Salisa doesn't have the answers to. But she listens to all the questions anyway, and says 'I don't know' to each one, excitedly. The taxi driver must be wondering what in hell is going on.

When we reach the hospital, only Salisa is allowed to go into her sister's room. She is in a room by herself, I can see through the window. There are other beds in the room, empty ones. 'Is this normal for a public hospital?' I ask. 'To give her a room by herself?'

'No', says Mali. 'But this is a serious situation. Sensitive, you know.'

We stand in the corridor outside the room for about fifteen minutes and watch Salisa and Khwan through the window. Though Salisa told me Khwan looks more like Mali's sister than hers because of her lighter skin, to me, Khwan looks like Salisa—same hair, same features. The only difference is that Khwan doesn't look tough like Salisa, but she's asleep, so maybe it's just hard to tell right now.



Salisa holds Khwan for a long time, with Khwan unmoving, in a deep sleep. Then—reluctantly—she gets up and comes into the hallway with us. The nurse sees her close the door to the room and approaches. ‘She didn’t wake up’, said Salisa.

‘She will’, said the nurse. ‘Her injuries are minor. But she was very upset. She needs to rest, very badly, so we sedated her. She’ll be fine.’

‘What are her injuries?’ Dave asks.

‘She has a broken thumb, and a laceration on her left forearm. There was some glass in the wound that we removed. She is dehydrated so we have her on fluids. And she also has some cuts and bruises on her ... her—’ She looks over at Dave, and says what I can only assume to be ‘vagina’ in Thai. He looks at the floor. I remember he speaks Thai.

The nurse wants us all to go back to the hotel. Salisa refuses to go. Someone eventually brings a roll-out bed. Salisa goes back into the room, sits next to Khwan, holds her hand and stares at her intently, like she never plans to let her out of her sight again.

Mali, Dave and I go to the waiting room just down the corridor. It is small, obviously meant to serve the people waiting on patients just in this corridor. No one else is in there. There is a small television in the corner and the news is on. We sit and stare at it. I’m the only one who can’t understand it. We spend a very uncomfortable night in the waiting room, sleeping a few hours on the couches but otherwise sitting up, in case we hear anything about Khwan. Mentally, I know I should be relieved, but I don’t feel it in my body yet. I feel full of adrenaline and anxiety.

I text Justin to let him know what happened, to pass on the good news to the AAPT. A few hours later, he replies to tell me he is in the hospital lobby, and I go

down to meet him. He is watching my face closely as I approach, and holds his arms out to embrace me when I reach him. He holds me close. My jaw relaxes a little, but I start talking so he'll let me go. I fill him in on Khwan's condition. I tell him we don't know anything yet, she hasn't woken up.

'Be sure to get as much information from her as you can, and let me know. It will probably be too much for her to come into the office to talk about it. But if she can let us know where she was, who did this to her, we can try to shut them down. Or go in to get more girls out.'

I look at Justin hard for a moment. He looks like he is about my age. He has been doing this for at least the past five years. I realise I don't know much about him. 'Why do you do this? This work?' I expect to hear the kind of answer I would give, if someone I didn't know very well asked me the same question. Important to make a difference, just doing what I can. But he surprises me.

'I feel guilty. I didn't do anything to deserve what I have. To be male, white, privileged. Born in America. I'm not special, I'm not a saint. I'm not even always a good person. And I'm definitely not selfless. Ultimately, like most people, I'm just trying to make myself feel better.' He smiles at me. 'That's not the answer I normally give. You know, I'm supposed to say things that will encourage other people to become volunteers. But you, you're already convinced, aren't you?' He hugs me again before I leave.

The next morning, we all sneak quietly into Khwan's room. Salisa wakes up. She stayed awake all night and only went to sleep on the cot about two hours ago. Khwan hasn't woken up the whole time.

We sit and wait. What seems like an eternity later, Khwan wakes up. ‘Salisa’, she says, and she smiles warmly at her sister. Salisa starts crying and holds Khwan’s hand tighter.

We don’t ask her what happened to her for a few days. When I think about it now, somehow I wish we hadn’t asked her at all.

## Chapter Twenty-six

Khwan had been on her break from the hotel and was planning to walk to the 7-Eleven down the street to buy some vanilla Dutchie yogurt when she was stopped by a young, good-looking man she had seen on the street several times before. He asked her for the time and then struck up a conversation about nothing in particular. She can't remember what they spoke about, only that he sent a quick text to someone just after they started talking, then a few minutes later his phone rang. He wasn't the most interesting person to talk to in the world, and she was planning on walking off when he answered it, when a car pulled up beside them and suddenly he was pushing her in.

Someone from inside the car grabbed her around her waist and was pulling. She screamed and struggled and dropped her bag, but it was over in less than three seconds and she was inside the car. The young man squished into the back seat next to her. She was surrounded by other men whose faces she couldn't see. For a moment she remembered, terrified, the time Salisa had taken her to the bar where she worked, how the men all around her, the *farang*, had looked to her then. How relieved she had been when Justin had come to her and told her he would rescue her. But there was no Justin now, and these men were not *farang*. They were her own kind. She felt a jab in her arm, and then blacked out.

She woke up dizzy and everything looked blurry. She was cold, and naked. She tried to sit up but couldn't; she was handcuffed to the bed. The walls there didn't reach the ceiling; she was surrounded by partitions, like some office building, or a monstrous, unhygienic hospital ward. There was no door, just a gap in the partitions

opposite the bed with a curtain closed over it. The bed was a single bed. It was brass. There was a small table next to the bed. It had a red plastic bowl of water on it, with a blue rag inside. On the floor, just under the bed, there was a bigger green plastic bowl. There was also a plastic bottle of Singha water, unopened. Her mouth was so dry she considered drinking it, but thought better of it.

She was breathing hard; she had to calm down. She closed her eyes and listened. Other breathing was coming from somewhere beyond the partitions. She wasn't the only person in the larger room. There must be other cubicles around her.

The short, stocky Thai man dressed all in black who entered the room a few minutes later had a small, black gun shoved down the front of his jeans. Silently he pulled it out and showed it to Khwan. Then he moved the table away from the bed where she couldn't reach it and set the gun down. His face was calm, like a statue in a temple. Khwan felt hot acid rising in the back of her throat. Coldly, the man undid his belt and hung it over the bed head, next to where Khwan was cuffed.

He raped her. She started to scream and he took the belt and wrapped it around her neck until she stopped. When he was done, he beat her. He told her never to scream again. She should not make any noise at all, or he would beat her again. He did up his pants, replaced his gun, and put the table back where it was. Pointing at the red water bowl, he said, 'Wash yourself between men.' Pointing at the bowl under the bed, he said, 'Piss in there.' Then he left.

For the rest of the first day and night, she was left alone. She heard muffled, male voices. Heavy breathing and moaning. Stifled screams. She tried to remain calm and think about the situation, where she was, how she could escape. There was no natural light and she had no clear sense of how much time had passed. She guessed the people who'd taken her had done this deliberately. She guessed they'd

left her alone today deliberately as well. They wanted her to know how desperate her situation was, and they wanted her to get used to it.

That trip to Phuket when she was thirteen years old. Salisa had disappeared and she had been sitting in a bar surrounded by women who slept with men for money and everything she had known to be true had turned upside down. She felt like that now, a hundred times more like that now.

It made her feel good to think about Salisa. She lay in the buzzing light, tried to breathe evenly and thought about Salisa. Eventually, there was a snap, and the lights shut off. She was in total darkness, handcuffed to the bed. The image of her sister in her mind started to shudder and dissolve and she squeezed her eyes tight and tried to force it to come back.

She began to write a letter in her mind.

*Dear Salisa,*

*You are the strongest person I know. I know what you have done for me. I think you think I don't know. You have kept it all from me, what you have been through. What you have had to do in order to send that money home to us. And what you must have done to earn even more money to send home to keep me in school. I understand even better now, today. I know that it is only because of you, your strength, that I was able to finish school. That I am able to go to university to study for a good job. I am in Bangkok to make you proud of me, and to make everything you have gone through worth it. I will get through this now, because getting that job, that good job, is more important than anything else. Otherwise what you have done for me will be for nothing. I won't let what you have done be for nothing. I can be strong like you. I can even take care of you, sister. Soon. I will take care of you and our parents so you can stop.*

*Love, Khwan*

Khwan kept quiet when the first ‘customer’ came in to rape her. It nearly killed her to do it—her stomach felt sick as he moved on top of her and she closed her eyes and wanted to go somewhere, anywhere else—but she made herself keep quiet. It got easier and easier to keep quiet even as the pain got worse. She didn’t make a sound or speak a word. Men would come into the room, one by one, all day and most of the night, and rape her. In between, she washed herself as instructed and drank water. She used the plastic bowl under the bed to urinate.

Once a day around lunch time, the man in black, who she now understood was the guard, would come in and uncuff her. The first time he did this, he held his gun and pointed it at her the entire time. Every day after that, he would just point to his gun in its position in the front of his pants, reminding her it was there.

Once she was uncuffed, he would take her to shower and eat her one meal of the day. She went first, and he followed. She bit her lip and tried not to be terrified—if he wanted to kill her, he would have done so. She was more useful to him alive. It made her sick to think that, but at least it let her keep from screaming and getting beaten again.

Outside her room, she turned left. There was a corridor between cubicles. She could see that there were four cubicles on each side of this corridor alone, and it looked like there were two other corridors on either side of this one. This one was in the middle of the room. At one end, to the right of her cubicle, there was a thick door with multiple locks. This was the entrance; she had heard the men going in and out of it during the day, the guard undoing and re-fastening the locks. At the other end of

the corridor was the bathroom. The guard would open the door, and then stand in it watching her, with his back to the corridor. He kept his eyes firmly on her, looking up and down her body as she washed herself as quickly as she could, throwing water over her body. There was a small window in the bathroom. It was very dirty but she could see through it that they were on the ground floor of the building. There was also a squat pan in the bathroom. When she used it, the guard turned his back, but didn't move from where he was standing.

After Khwan was finished, she would be taken to the kitchen. It was in the back right hand corner of the large room. To get to it, she walked out of the bathroom and turned left, going down another short corridor. When she reached the kitchen, there would be bowls of food on the long bench that ran along the wall, a sink in the middle of it, an old fridge full of the Singha bottles of water, and a rice cooker that looked unused. The food wasn't made in the kitchen, she decided. The meals, rice with vegetables, always the same, were brought in from outside. There was a window in the kitchen, too, over the sink. It was larger than the one in the bathroom, and just as dirty. But Khwan could just see through it. She saw an alleyway that ran between this building and the next. She couldn't put her head right against the window to see what was at the end of the alley because the guard was still standing behind her, watching her eat.

The guard would then take her back to her little room and replace her cuffs. When she got back there at the end of her shower and food time each day, her pee bowl had been emptied and a new bottle of water placed on her table. She never saw who did that.

Khwan would try to count how many showers were taken before hers and how many afterwards, but it was different every day. The guard must start at a



different side of the room each time, randomly. But Khwan was never last. She was always somewhere in the middle.

She tried to keep track of the days but she couldn't. Only eating one small meal and drinking one bottle of water a day kept her starving, dizzy, and confused. And she hurt. She hurt constantly. Her wrist was bruised and bloody from the cuff. Her arm ached from its position like it was going to fall off. When she washed herself, she saw blood coming from her vagina and anus and they stung like they were on fire. She tried not to let herself think about it.

Every so often she would hear one of the girls from the other rooms scream or cry out, and then she would hear her being beaten. At night, she heard quiet crying coming from all around her. She wondered how long it would be before she would go insane.

Every night, she did the same thing. She closed her eyes and let herself see Salisa. She kept focusing on Salisa, not thinking of anything except what her sister looked like, for a long time. Then, when Salisa was fixed in her mind, not going anywhere, she would write another mental letter.

*Dear Salisa,*

*Do you remember what it's like back home? It has been so long since you were there, in our village. I have only been gone a little while and I have an ache in my chest when I think about it. Every day when I would come home from school in the afternoon, I would sit behind our house by myself and listen to the quiet. I would look out over the rice paddies and fields. I would watch the grass, the trees, everything, so green, moving in the wind. The buffalos walking around slowly, eating grass. They seemed so happy to just be there, in the fields, doing nothing all day. I would only sit there for a little while, every day. When I was younger, I just did it*

*because I was tired after school, and wanted to rest before I did my chores. But as I got older, I used the time to reflect, and to pray. I would pray to Buddha for our parents. Even for our brother. But mainly I prayed for you, Salisa. So that Buddha would protect you. Now can I ask you to pray for me, Salisa? Will you say the same prayer that I said for you? Will you ask Buddha to protect me?*

*Love, Khwan*

Sometimes she thought of what Salisa had said to her, about how she had to work hard, all her life, to keep from ending up a prostitute like Salisa had. Had Salisa worked in a place like this? No—it was impossible that Salisa had ever been in a place like this. You never came back from a place like this and stayed as tough as Salisa was. Places like this broke girls forever. *I'll be broken forever*, she thought. In Khwan's mind, Salisa's image shook her head. *You'll get out. You'll work hard and manage a hotel one day*, it seemed to say. *I won't ever let you get drawn into this. I won't ever let you be like me.*

She started crying in the darkness, different kinds of tears from before, and she could feel her sister's love fill every inch of her. She knew that this place wouldn't break her. She knew she would escape.

Of course, she had been trying to think of ways to escape since she first found herself in this hell, but there didn't seem to be any way that was certain. She didn't know if the door was always locked; it must be. She didn't know what was outside. If she climbed out one of the windows and ran, would she find a dead end? If the guard caught her, he would certainly shoot her. She had no doubt about that at all. He never said a word to her, even seemed bored. How anyone could do the job he does every day, she had no idea. But she wouldn't let him stop her. She would escape. If she didn't, she would probably die anyway.

In the dark, feeling the cuffs eating into her wrist, she worked out what she would have to do. It seemed too horrifying to even imagine doing. She thought of Salisa, though, and slowly, slowly, she knew that she could do it. She began to work out when to do it, her shoulder straining and aching in its socket, as she listened to girls crying all around her, invisibly. She couldn't think of a way she could save anyone but herself. She tried to feel guilty about the girls she would be leaving behind, but she just felt empty. All she knew was that she had to get herself out.

The next day, she waited until after her shower and food. As soon as she was brought back to her room, she started trying to break her thumb. She had seen it done once in an American action movie she had watched at the cinema in Chiang Mai with her cousin Dao. She had cringed and closed her eyes when the character had done it, and could never have imagined doing it herself. It's all special effects, she had told herself then in order to deal with the scene. He's not really breaking his thumb. It wasn't special effects now. She bit her lip and pressed her thumb against the head of the bed, far enough for it to bend back, far enough for it to hurt. It kept hurting, more and more. She kept pressing. Though the pain was excruciating, she didn't make a sound. She had had plenty of practice doing that over the last couple of weeks, being quiet when she was being hurt.

Eventually, her thumb cracked and she let out a sharp gasp, then bit her lip to keep from screaming. It hurt much worse than she had anticipated. But she had to act fast, before her hand swelled. She squeezed her eyes shut, tears stinging her cheek, and she pulled her hand out of the cuffs. It still only just scraped through with some force.

She gave herself thirty seconds to recover, then lifted herself out of the bed quietly, grabbed the cloth from the water bowl and wrapped it tightly around her hand. She grabbed the t-shirt and shorts from under the bed that she was allowed to put on to sleep in and dressed. She sat quietly on the bed and listened as the water in the shower was turned off. She held her breath while that girl ate her food and was taken back to her room. She waited still while the guard uncuffed the next woman and took her to the bathroom. As soon as the water was splashing through the pipes again, she stuck her head out through the curtain and looked down the corridor towards the bathroom. As with her, the guard was facing the girl in the shower, his back to the room.

She tiptoed down to the end of the corridor and tried the door. It was locked. Now she had to do what she was furiously hoping she wouldn't have to. Run right past the guard and into the kitchen. The only way out was that kitchen window. She went as fast and as quietly as she could, hoping that any sound she made would be drowned out by the running water from the shower. She slipped right past him and he didn't turn around.

She ran into the kitchen, her head woozy from the pain, and picked up the rice cooker with both hands, her good one and the broken one. She held her breath and sucked her teeth against the pain. This, he would hear. So she had to be fast. She threw the rice cooker through the glass window.

The guard shouted as she scrambled up onto the bench and into the window frame. She cut her left arm on some of the glass still clinging there. She heard the guard's boots on the concrete floor; he was running towards her. She jumped down into the alley into the brilliant natural light.

She tried to force her eyes to adjust to being outside. One way was a dead end. But the other wasn't, it was a side street. She bolted towards it, praying she wouldn't be shot as she went. She didn't look back.

Once she reached the end of the alley between the two buildings, she turned left randomly and kept running. The street was long, but by the time she reached the end of it, she was on a bigger road. There were people everywhere. She turned back and didn't see anyone coming towards her. But she didn't slow down.

She hailed a *tuk-tuk*. 'I need the hospital', she said, the first thing she had said in days.

'Are you okay?' the driver asked, frowning, and she started crying hysterically.

She told the driver that she had just been attacked and robbed. She said she had no money, showed him the cut on her arm, and asked him to take her to the hospital for free. He took off his jacket to wrap around her arm and took her to the closest public hospital as fast as he could. She broke down and cried uncontrollably. 'My sister', she said to him as the *tuk-tuk* was speeding through traffic. 'Call my sister. Call Salisa.' But of course he couldn't.

Everything horrible from the past weeks, everything Khwan had forced herself not to feel, was spilling into her all at once. She blacked out. She had no idea how he got her inside.

She woke up to the sight of the doctor, a Thai man. She screamed and struggled, thinking he was there to rape her, until she remembered. She was free.

'It's okay', the nurse somewhere behind her was saying; the nurse's arms were on her, calming her. 'It's okay. You're safe now.'

‘My sister’, she said. ‘Tell my sister I did it. Tell Salisa I did what she wanted me to do.’

‘Salisa?’ the nurse asked.

‘Tell her!’ Khwan shouted, and the nurse went to find a phone. She brought it into Khwan’s room and waited until the girl was calm enough to tell her Salisa’s phone number.

## Chapter Twenty-seven

*It's over.* I keep trying to tell myself that. Except it isn't over, is it, because Khwan doesn't look so bright and happy anymore. Not like Salisa has always described her to me. She looks older than I expected her to look, harder. She looks even more like Salisa now than she did through the window, unconscious, the night before. But she looks strangely small, and very scared.

The doctor and nurse come in to tell Khwan that she is free to leave the hospital. They have made appointments for her to come back for checkups, to have the stitches in her arm removed and to check to see that her thumb is healing normally. They have also made appointments for her to see a counsellor at the hospital every day for the next three days, and then twice a week for the next few weeks. They give all of this information to Salisa. 'Good luck', they tell her, and they send us all on our way.

In the hospital lobby, we stand awkwardly in a group, five of us now, and discuss what to do. Khwan doesn't want to go back to the Blossom Inn, understandably. She doesn't want to stay in Bangkok at all anymore.

'She doesn't feel safe.' Salisa tells us, speaking for her sister. 'I wasn't going to let her stay here by herself anyway. She is going to come back to Samui with Mali and me.'

'She'll be safe there', Mali nods. 'With us.'

'Safe?' I burst out, exhausted and unthinking. 'Are any of you really *safe* there? You are going right back to work in the industry that just did this to Khwan. It

might be for tourists and it might pay better, there might be no closed brothels or kidnapping on Samui, but it's the same thing. It's still *prostitution*.'

'Hey', says Salisa, cross. She looks at my face and doesn't say anything else. She knows what I'm talking about. She doesn't disagree with me. She holds her sister's shoulder a little tighter. Dave's face looks very pale. I know he agrees.

I say I'm sorry. Mali says not to worry about it. Salisa doesn't seem to really notice anything except Khwan, in her arms. Khwan is looking at everything like she's never seen it before in her life. And yet everyone is acting as if they are in good spirits and we make plans. We book two deluxe rooms in a five-star hotel close to the Bangkok airport and once there we all sit on the floor of the larger room, the one with a double bed and a single. Salisa and Khwan will share one and Dave will sleep in the other. Mali is bunking with me. We snack on continual room service orders and talk into the night.

'You're going to stay with us', Salisa keeps saying to Khwan. 'You're my brilliant little sister. I know exactly what you'll do. You'll transfer to the tourism university on Samui and finish your degree. You will manage one of the biggest five-star resorts on the island one day! And you can help Mali and me run our restaurant.'

'It sounds wonderful', Khwan says, like she's trying to remember what wonderful things are. Salisa keeps talking about it, and eventually I can't stand it anymore and have to go into the hallway and cry. After a minute, Dave comes out to see me.

'They're going to go back to the bars', I say. 'Even after this, they're going to keep working at those bars. They'll work at those bars forever.'

'No, they won't', Dave says. 'They'll earn money for their restaurant. They'll quit, and they'll run it. They're closer to it than you think.'



‘Will you help them?’ I ask.

‘If they want me to’, he smiles. ‘If Salisa lets me. I can’t offer anything to Salisa, you know that. I have to wait to be asked. It has to be her idea. She wants to do it on her own. But I don’t know, it’s different now. I think she realises that she can’t go on. I think she might be ready to let me help. I think she feels ... differently about me. More ... I know she loves me. She might be starting to know it, too.’

Neither of us says anything for a minute.

‘What are you going to do, Lara?’ he asks. ‘Are you going to stay here, after this? Keep working?’

‘I want to go home’, I say automatically, without really meaning it.

‘You want to go home’, Dave says. ‘But are you going to?’ He already knows me so well.

‘No’, I tell him. ‘Not yet. This is too important for me to go home.’

I’ll volunteer at the APTT with Justin and conduct my research from there, doing something to make a difference at the same time. Justin already said I could stay with him and I will. I call Aidan to tell him my plan and he doesn’t like the idea of me staying with some guy for two months, especially since he hasn’t met him, but he doesn’t like the idea of me staying by myself anymore either. This will all come later though, once I come back from the visa run to Singapore that will give me another sixty days in Thailand, and I’m not going to think about it now.

All I can think now is how hard it is for me to handle knowing just these three stories about these three women. I just can’t fathom there being so many more of them. Millions of stories just like these and worse, stories of women suffering out there under the pink lights, and women suffering in the closed brothels, in the dark.

Things already seem better in just a few days, and we all get ready to leave. Khwan seems to improve. She seems excited about studying at the uni on Samui, and finding another job as a hotel receptionist to get by. I tell her about the hotels I've stayed in on Samui, and say I will email them to recommend her.

Salisa and Mali talk about quitting working as bargirls, far sooner than they'd planned. They go back and forth, and by the time they get on the flight to Samui, I still don't know if they are going back to work at Happy Nights or if they are going to take the advice I've given them and accept the money from Dave, even if it's as a loan, to open their restaurant *now*, and not later. What I do know—what we all know—is that Salisa is going to stop sending money home to her parents. For so many years, since Ma drove into Salisa's village in her Lexus, she's been working for them. She's been fulfilling her duty as the eldest daughter. If she stops, she will be disowned and shamed. She won't be able to return home to her village ever again. But she has to stop. No matter how well she and Mali run their small restaurant, they can't expect to be able to make more than they'll need to support themselves and Khwan. I see the way she looks at Khwan and I know she has already sacrificed so much for her sister. She'll make this sacrifice, too.

Only a few days after we got Khwan back, I'm standing at the airport. I'm leaving first. Salisa, Mali, Khwan and Dave are going to Samui tomorrow. Dave hasn't said how long he will stay with them, but I know it will be for as long as possible. He will stay forever, if Salisa wants him to. I think she does.

Mali and Salisa are standing next to me. 'You helped us so much', Salisa is saying. 'We'll never forget this.'

'I did almost nothing', I said. 'But I'm glad I did what I could do.'

‘Everyone does what she can do’, smiled Mali, and she leans in to hug me.

Salisa does the same. ‘Send us your book when you’ve finished writing it’, she says. ‘Make us look good, okay?’

I laugh, and I hold her tight, and she holds me back. ‘You’ll look good, don’t worry. And I’m the one who has to thank you: I wouldn’t be able to write the book without you. I hope that it will do something to help. And it will be because of you.’

Then, as Salisa has seen others do so many times before, I walk through the airport security to my flight, alone.

END