

WHEN THE
DARKNESS
SWALLOWED
THE SUN

ROBIN NEWBOLD



Copyright © 2025 by Robin Newbold.

Robin Newbold asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

Artwork: Adobe Stock © guritno.

Cover designed by Spectrum Books.

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-915905-66-6

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means without the express written permission of the author or of Spectrum Books, except for brief quotations used for promotion or in reviews.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or events, is entirely coincidental.

First edition, Spectrum Books, 2026

Discover more books at www.spectrum-books.com

For Michael

Chapter 1

Dan kicked off his flip-flops, the white powdery sand enveloped his toes, still warm from another sun-drenched day but looking out to sea an inky, eerie black told another story. This was the stretch of beach where the boy's head had been split in two with a rock and his girlfriend drowned after apparently having her once pretty head held underwater, leaving a bloated, blackened horror.

He bowed his head, shakily lit a cigarette, horrible habit he'd picked up since... well, he didn't want to think about that, couldn't. Let's just say since he jumped on a plane, made Thailand his home for want of a better word. Dan felt about as far from home as possible, looking away from the sea, up at the stars all a twinkle, felt that ache in his gut, bending double, as if paradise was mocking him. The disco thud from the nearby bars betrayed it was no paradise though, and he thought back again to the crime scene photos he'd seen of the eighteen-year-old backpackers, Bill's eyes as if popping out, the purple gash that was like a ravine through the centre of his forehead. And, as for Corrine, well he wanted to forget, delete like a malicious text from an ex but it was always there, that blonde hair streaked crimson, so much blood he could almost smell the butcher's shop stink.

Dan inhaled the fag smoke as far into his lungs without gagging, batted at the sweat dripping from his forehead, inadvertently looked at his watch. Always the ticking of the clock, digging nails into his palm as the second hand swept round, reminding him he was on someone else's time, the Bangkok Daily's. No one in the newsroom had volunteered for the assignment, didn't want the hassle, so being the cub reporter here he was. And his squat Australian boss, the Little Ignorant

Fucker from Oz – Liff – wanted answers, a splash, told him sex sells but that murder trumped sex every time, especially a “sexy murder” of two nubile young things as he’d so sickeningly put it. But he couldn’t get his head around it as he flopped onto the sand, inches from the water’s edge, gentle lapping of the waves in his ears, even though the boom of the music in the background felt like some ominous warning. Yeah, Thailand was the wild west and Koh Maphraw, or Coconut Island as everybody called it, a bit dodgy but this? He selected the crime scene photos again in his overactive mind, the ones that’d been invading his dreams, despite the cloying heat he shuddered, though as if in tandem a breeze rustled the nearby palms, ushering in coal black clouds that instantly blotted out the moon, the stars.

Dan was shaking as he stood, that wind again, sending goose pimples riding up his arms and he trod back into his flip-flops, looking one way then the other down the deserted beach, a double murder obviously not good for business, though the beat droned on. Cupping his hands he lit another fag, stomping in the opposite direction to the twinkly lights of the bars and restaurants, the guesthouses, though shacks would be a more accurate description but you didn’t need much here, what with the sun, sea and the other, he knew that. But that’s what made Bill and Corrine’s brutal killing so senseless and that’s why he was heading for the scrubby bit of land well away from the picture postcard bit of the island, the scrubby bit of land where the wonderful Thai police speculate the couple were making out, that someone took a liking to the girl and a fight ensued – Dan trying to find an explanation for the inexplicable. But clambering over some rocks, rocks littered with plastic bottles, old beer cans, cigarette butts and other unmentionables the beach cleaners never got to, he knew it’d been no fight, they’d been butchered, hadn’t stood a bloody chance. Why?

The wind had got up and it carried the sound of the music away, just the sloshing of the sea, shards of lightning

periodically splitting the sky, like that cracked forehead and he could sense the coming storm. He turned from the water, stared into the treeline about one hundred metres or so up the beach, thick jungle, though he'd seen it in daylight and knew the foliage barely covered all the crap discarded there, basically an unofficial tip, the unloved piece of the island. It was supposedly out of sight, out of mind and he worried that the same could be applied to Bill and Corrine after hearing some of the stories peddled by locals, that they were pissheads or druggies or that just being *farang* was enough. Yep, *farang*, that lovely catch-all term Thais had for foreigners, often spat out like an insult as if all tourists were guilty of something.

Thunder boomed and it heralded the first fat drops of rain, while Dan ducked instinctively but his eyes were fixated on the thicket of trees, almost certain he'd seen the red glow of a cigarette, as if he was being watched, followed. His heart-beat thumped in his ears but instead of heading back to where he thought he'd seen the pinprick of light, he quickened his pace, stumbling over rocks as he went, cursing the fact he was in bloody flip-flops, rubber cutting into the between his toes. Breaths coming fast, threatening to overwhelm him, he rounded the corner of a headland but shook his head at a massive wall of rock, absolutely unnavigable, the darkness complete, no welcoming bars or restaurants here, just boulders one way, thick jungle to the left.

"Fuck," he said, panting, wiping his drenched face, knowing he'd have to go back the way he came, that he'd have to pass the place where he thought he'd sensed someone watching him, sniffing the air like he could smell the tell-tale cigarette smoke.

The message came back to Dan, the words a bar owner – the man with the unblinking eyes – had uttered this afternoon when he'd found out he was a reporter, that it'd be a good idea if he "left the island tomorrow". He shuddered again knowing that wouldn't be good enough for Liffó, that the Aussie veteran had demanded a scoop given the Daily would

be ahead of all the “foreign hacks”, wanted a page one splash and no excuses.

He turned back, breathing out, tension in his neck finally easing as he saw the lights ahead but then he wondered if that’s how the two backpackers had felt, that false sense of security on this so-called paradise island. The lone figure silhouetted on the horizon closing fast over the sand posed a more urgent question and he zig-zagged round the rocks up the beach into the trees, blundering through vegetation, feeling the uneven floor rip at his feet as he slipped in and out of the flip-flops, over roots, sending him stumbling but just about managing to stay upright. The jungle was weirdly damp and airless after the beach, panicked sound of his breathing, movement amplified but then he detected noise from behind, the snapping of twigs, the trampling of earth, he was being hunted, staggering around in the dark as the evil closed in, like it had for Bill and Corrine. He turned just as a hand caught his shoulder, a powerful wrenching at his arm, whites of eyes flashing in the gloom, and Dan went limp. He had nowhere to run, as if his past had finally caught up with him. Was this karma?

He instinctively glanced down at the young man’s hand, holding something, but it wasn’t a knife, just a torch that he’d obviously used to guide his way, like some always prepared Boy Scout, friend rather than foe. In the charged silence, Dan felt his heart thrashing, gulping back words, mesmerised by the mischievous brown eyes, the goofy smile, the lithe body glistening in the pouring rain and the lad ogled right back, like who was hitting on who. No reason a married man should even be contemplating the possibilities on offer but he felt his mouth go dry as he gently shook, thinking back to Som, the missus, who’d bemoaned the fact he was Awol again, their smiley son Max and he didn’t want to think anymore. He was also transfixed by the tattoo on the muscly neck, so big he’d spotted it way back, a devil with angel’s wings.

“You know you’re just staring at me, right?”

“Oh, don’t worry about me. I just... I never know what to say when I meet a strange man in the middle of the jungle, a few metres from, you know, a double murder scene,” said Dan breathlessly, frantically wiping the sweat away.

“Man, what are you doing all out here on your own? Chalerm. Lerm for short.”

“Dan. But I could ask you the same question. It’s like I was followed,” he said, idly twisting at his wedding ring.

“*Me?* You think I followed you? I’m not that desperate.”

“No one else is here, but you were headed right towards me. That’s why I ran. I dunno, this place feels plagued.”

“Don’t worry, man. Chill out. I had dinner with a friend, came to the beach for a cigarette. Saw you hanging around. I came to warn you. You’re right, it’s not safe here, especially for *farang*,” he said, eyeing the ring but moving a caressing hand up Dan’s arm.

And he didn’t brush it off, like he knew he should’ve, felt the thrill of the touch through him like some electric current, hoping the lad didn’t see the goose bumps but then thinking back to Bill, to Corrine, the ticking watch on his wrist, to why he was here, Liffio.

“Do you know anything...”

“Shhh,” said Chalerm, putting a finger to Dan’s lips, the Thai’s eyes boring into his.

He stood in silence, like he was asked, beginning to tremble again, though not from the cold, the heat was suffocating but there was something in the air, that image of Bill coming back to him, the deep blackened gash in the forehead of what had been a handsome, everything to live for kind of face. In that moment, Dan sensed the evil like it was seeping up from the jungle floor, as if the soupy air was infecting his pores, and he didn’t have any more questions, his mouth parched, crusted shut.

“Listen, I’ve got to get back to my buddy. He’ll wonder where I’ve got to, but put your number in there. I’ll text you once I’m back in Bangkok. But no more hanging around on

deserted beaches, you're not Castaway, you got me?" said the Thai.

Like an automaton, he did as he was told, tapping the digits into the lad's mobile. Chalerm flashed that smile when he was done, brushed his cheek with the slightest of kisses, almost as if he'd been bitten by an unseen mosquito, the young man jogging back in the direction of the flickering lights.

"Once I'm back in Bangkok," he repeated to himself over and over like some mad mantra, trying to work out how Chalerm knew, *what he knew*, as he followed in his footsteps, like it could offer any clue but instead Dan shook his head. Even the lad's weird American twang, more Keeping Up with the Kardashians than international school, added another layer of unease, intrigue.

He broke into a shaky run, needing to put as much mileage between himself and the murder scene as possible, as much distance from that shameful, cack-handed attempt at flirting by a married so-called straight man with someone that looked fresh out of uni.

He put a hand to his throbbing head, sighing as he slid open the raggedy curtains of his rustic beach bungalow, Liffø hardly one to put him up anywhere swanky, though this was Coconut Island, it just wasn't the kind of place for suitcases on wheels or five star, it didn't do fancy. The sun dazzled his eyes and he blinked it away. A few mangy street dogs curled up in the shade were the only signs of life, otherwise an empty beach with just some tattered umbrellas rippling in a light breeze.

Dan vaguely remembered he'd got in with a bunch of backpackers last night but had eventually tuned out to the travellers' tales as the Thai whisky took hold, though that'd been the plan. He was probably ten years older than most of

the Gap Yahs but he often felt a generation removed, though how he'd prefer to see things through their less jaded eyes, really hoping he hadn't come across as too much of a twat with his old Asia hand patter, the cynical hack, which was all a bloody act, anyway. No, he'd just done a runner from England, then reinvented himself, like half the newsroom at the Bangkok Daily – an act of cowardice. He'd only gone out last night hoping to bump back into Chalerm, but of course there was no sign of the dazzling smile, imagining he'd gone back and dazzled his “buddy” with it instead.

He shambled into what was supposedly town, ducking his head due to the fierceness of the sun, unrelenting light raining down as he crunched along a dirt road. Through the glare, the dust he viewed the concrete slabs of shophouses with corrugated iron roofs, the thick black electricity cabling hanging down, the roaming, snarly dogs all far from the picture postcard Coconut Island but Dan knew this was the essence of it, in fact the essence of Thailand despite all the Land of Smile schtick, the hall of mirrors, none of it could disguise the Third World. People were desperate, and they'd do desperate things, thinking back to the so-called fatal fight Bill and Corrine had got involved in. But backpackers from nice homes didn't come here for a ruck, they wanted all that hippy dippy crap, wielding their Lonely Planets, wanting to broaden their minds sitting on some beanbag looking up at the stars. No, it wasn't any fight, thought Dan, Billy Boy and Corrine were murdered probably just for looking at someone the wrong way. Or just one of them had been responsible for a minor transgression that now counted as disrespect in this world – one that could get you knifed in Peckham and bludgeoned in Paradise Lost.

He reached the police post, neurotically checking his phone as he did so but still no text from Chalerm, wondering if the thing was actually turned on. Disappointingly, the cop shop itself was more like a shack than some robust statement of authority, the only sign of officialdom a flimsy sign

blowing in the wind out front like some gone to seed pub. Dan rapped on the door, though he'd looked over both shoulders beforehand, still the sense he was being watched, warnings of the bar owner, the Thai boy on his mind but he didn't want to let the English lovers down, crime scene photos seared into his brain.

"And you are?" said a rotund figure poking a pig-like face out of the door, eyes inexplicably hidden behind mirrored shades.

"Dan. Dan Young. I called yesterday. From the Bangkok Daily. The newspaper."

"The Bangkok Daily?"

"You must be Police-General Peeklong," he said, vaguely recognising the gruff, impatient voice he'd got when he called the previous day, hoping he'd uttered the magic words to the head honcho shipped over from Bangkok.

"I don't like journalists. But I tell you what, this is how I work. I do something for you, you do something for me."

"Whatever you say."

"Glad we got that straight, Mr Farang. Come on, I've got something to show you," said the cop, nodding over to a dusty motorbike.

He jumped on the back, noticing the policeman's patent leather boots caked in mud as he impatiently kick-started the bike. The dust swirled around Dan's face, while the rutted road seemed to deteriorate more and more as they picked up speed, his knuckles white as he clung on but it was as though Peeklong was actually heading for the potholes, like a game of rodeo, trying to eject his passenger. He thought back to the accident, to London, but then he didn't want to think anymore, closing his eyes and holding even tighter, the buzz-sawing of the bike screaming in his ears. But he couldn't stand not to see where he was going, fixated back on the road ahead, the feeling of being totally out of control and the sly little looks over the shoulder from his tormentor, the smarmy smile told him he was being taken for a ride, literally.

The engine strained as they climbed a hill, as though struggling to carry the policeman's hefty weight, and Dan finally had time to take in the surroundings. He shook his head at the approximation of a tropical island because while glimpses through swaying palms offered inviting views of white sands and blue seas, the side of the road, metre after metre, was covered in litter, putrefying rubbish and he knew he was far from the places the tourists were meant to see, the picture postcard fading to black once again.

They stopped outside a temple but not like the grand edifices of those in Bangkok or Chiang Mai, no, this place looked unloved, forgotten, the stupas a faded nothingness, the once whitewashed walls a sagging grey, emaciated cats roaming around under browning trees. The police-general drew a lighter out of his pocket and tended to a little tumbledown structure, what looked like a shrine, illuminating a pencil-thin candle, even that looking Pound Shop.

"You got to keep the spirits happy. So many spirits out there on this island, bad ones," said Peeklong, pointing beyond the crumbling walls into the shadows of the jungle beyond.

Dan followed in silence, the policeman wrestling open some wooden doors of one of the squat rooms adjoining the stupas, kicking away at what was an apparently dead cat as he did so, slick innards covering his boots. It took him a while for his eyes to adjust to the dark but the smell hit first, reminding him of when someone in his student house had left a chicken in the fridge over the Easter holidays and they could never get rid of the stink afterwards, like it was still up his nose and he bent over, almost puked, when his eyes latched onto a large table, two lumpy outlines under cheap sacking. He couldn't not look as like some sick magician, Peeklong removed the coverings, Bill and Corrine white as porcelain, though that black ravine ran down the boy's forehead but it appeared to be moving and when Dan dared look closer he saw it was alive with bluebottles.

“No!” he shouted, running out of the room despite his eyes being blinded by tears, leaning against the wall to hold himself up as the blood thumped in his ears.

“I’ll do whatever it takes, Bill, Corrine, whatever it fucking takes,” Dan rasped under his breath.

Peeklong suddenly barged out, putting a large hand on his shoulder, in his face now, whipping off his sunglasses, black beady eyes drilling into his. “I thought you wanted the facts. They don’t have a mortuary on the island. Here for safekeeping. Just tell your readers we’re not hiding anything. That’s what I want from you.”

“Do I get to ask something now?”

“Try it.”

“I heard they were last seen in Coco Bananas. That bar has quite a reputation, doesn’t it...”

“That’s where this ends, tourist. Or you can walk back to town. Remember, you’re a foreigner here, a guest, just a guest. Like they were.”

Chapter 2

The music throbbed in his ears, like the music he'd heard on what felt like that desolate stretch of beach yesterday, the one with the blackened, litter filled jungle behind it, the one where the bad spirits apparently roamed and despite the heat Dan was shivering. But as was his usual answer to the problem, any problem, he raised the bottle of Singha to his lips, though he craved something stronger, knew he would descend to that but he also knew he had to remain *compos mentis* to compute the scene. He was on the veranda of Coco Bananas, primarily because Peeklong's hackles had risen as soon as he'd mentioned it and the journalist's intuition kicked in – he was onto something. Secondly, he couldn't stand by while Bill and Corrine's bodies were decomposing, riven by flies in some dusty temple. Was this how they treated guests in Thailand? He bit into nails already destroyed, metallic taste of blood in his mouth, thinking about the girl's hair, how its shine resplendent in those always smiling school photos had morphed into an ashen grey that was streaked with crimson, once no doubt lovingly tended locks matted and filthy, like she'd been turned upside down and used to mop a toilet floor.

Additional motivation for him scoping out the bar was due to the Little Ignorant Fucker from Oz hassling him for a story, any kind of story. "We don't pay you to sit around drinking from coconuts all day, mate," was the comment ringing in his head from when he'd called the office earlier, imagining Liff's feet on the desk, having lit up, licking his lips at the next scandal to be exposed, the next once warm body going cold.

He looked around, Backpacker Central, youths with shiny smiles, half dressed, sporting various degrees of burns from the sun and slurping out of buckets, the type kids would take

to the beach with a spade. But this wasn't bucket and spade country; the aim here wasn't good, clean fun, the point was to get seriously wasted. That wasn't a story, though, despite hearing that the seriously wasted could be found in the club out back, the place that spanned three storeys, where you had to have the right smile, or the requisite amount of dosh, just to be admitted, though – call it journalists' instinct again – he had a feeling that's where Bill and Corrine had ended up or that's where their descent began.

“Mind if I join you?” he said, approaching a lad at an otherwise empty table, the boy simply nodding back, nose buried in a book, *The Beach* appropriately enough. “Great, isn't it?”

“What?”

“The book. Though they say truth can be stranger than fiction. You know with what went on here,” Dan said, leaning in to be heard over the thump of the music, heartened to glean an English accent, imagining Bill and Corrine.

“You're not a traveller, are you, mate?”

“You got me. I guess I just look like an old fart. I'm actually a reporter, from Bangkok. I...”

“Look, I didn't know 'em. The English couple, though I heard they weren't a couple.”

“Not a couple? How'd you mean?”

“The lad, Bill, I think his name was. He was gay, apparently. That's all I know, but I don't want to get involved.”

“Who told you?”

“Just the bush telegraph, travellers' tales, man. People gossip. Try the owner,” he said, shaking his head, going back to his book.

He approached the gargantuan backlit bar, which provided a great vantage point for the veranda and the beach beyond, the sea far off, glinting in the moonlight, like a fleeting glimpse of the paradise it all promised. But Dan knew better, also realising whoever owned somewhere like this must have influence, must be aware of all the ins and outs, was probably paying protection money to operate as brazenly as this on a

prime slice of seafront. Isn't that how nirvana worked here, he thought, as the unmistakable scent of ganja floated up his nostrils, flagrant joint smoking going on all around. He tapped his foot, kneaded those chewed nails into his palm, having demanded an audience with the owner via the barman. The request was initially met with a shrug of the shoulders like he'd not been understood, on the second attempt there was a slow shake of his meathead and a folding of muscled arms that looked so out of place on someone simply meant to be mixing drinks. Only when the magic words "journalist" and "Bangkok Daily" were uttered did some life appear in what had seemed lifeless eyes, and he'd gone off to deal with the request. Dan lit a cigarette, hand shaking, glancing up, noticing a CCTV camera in the ceiling, shuddering, wondering who was watching.

He jumped at the hand that clamped roughly onto his shoulder, wheeling around to a pair of blue eyes zeroing in on him, and Dan felt he wasn't in Kansas anymore. No, lost in that wild stare, supercilious grin, he felt he'd gone even further off grid, a place where rules didn't apply.

"Wanted to take a little walk on the wild side, did we, bud, Mr Journalist?" said the man, nasally American accent cutting through the throb, the immaculate thatch of blond hair like a helmet, as immovable as his glare.

"Dan, Dan Young..."

"Already know who you are. I do my freaking research. You have to in my line of work. Never know who might come knocking. I'm Todd Von Eil. Mr Von Eil to you and owner of this speakeasy."

"I have a few questions, if you don't mind," said Dan, bunching hands into fists behind his back, looking on as the American lit a cigar, the sober suit and no doubt expensive loafers ridiculous and intimidating all at once, like the cartoon gangster accent.

"No, they were never here. Read my lips, *never here*, you got that."

“How’s business?”

“Very clever, changing tack. Not just a pretty face, are we? You Limeys crack me up, always stirring. Let’s see, it’s 2010 now, so we’ve been open a couple of years and there’s never been a hint of trouble in my place, so don’t come looking for it, capiche.”

“How’d you end up here?”

“That’s where you’re not very smart. Precisely why you’re making pesos at a Third World rag and I’m standing here. This is gonna get you in trouble,” said Von Eil, twisting Dan’s nose, hard. “Never ask how anyone ended up here, you might not like the answer. But this place is a gold rush, and I’m front of the queue. Anything goes, bud, anything. You want guys, broads, something in between, you’re shopping in Bloomingdale’s.”

“The only thing I’m looking for, Mr Von Eil, is to find out what happened to those poor tourists, who came with a backpack full of dreams and are going home in body bags,” he said, jabbing a finger in the Yank’s face.

“Spare me the over-rehearsed lines. You Brits, jeez, you’re all the same. Bad actors. So uptight. Get the dude a drink, the best Scotch,” said Von Eil, snapping fingers at meathead behind the bar.

“I don’t...”

“I saw you knocking it back, this ain’t your first rodeo. Now take your medicine and have a look round. Feel free to browse in the club. Let ‘em know I sent you and don’t do anyone I wouldn’t,” he said, slinging a half-finished cigar at Dan’s feet, turning on his expensive heels.

He finally breathed out, gratefully grabbing the whisky, swigging it back in one go, the burning heat down his gullet a brief comfort but unable to get the American’s words out of his head, overwhelming, like the smell of his cologne. It was as if he was some Master of the Universe and everyone else just worthless, thinking back to his own dwindling bank balance, the modest place they lived in, then looking around at

this glittering gin palace, calculating him and the Yank were probably around the same age, pushing thirty, yet that was the only thing they could possibly have in common. Dan placed his glass on the shiny bar, indicated another drink, the barman eyeing him, nodding almost imperceptibly as he speared a lime with a knife he expertly wielded.

Cradling his fresh drink, Dan nodded to another heavy, the one manning a door to the club, wondering at the muscle on show when supposedly this was just a place for backpackers with flowers in their hair, not the lair of some Colombian drug cartel. The man waved him in, door swishing closed behind him, shivering as he was enveloped in an air-conditioned coolness, the place seemingly hermetically sealed from the veranda, dance music throb replaced by the gentle tinkling of a piano and as his eyes adjusted, he could make out human forms silhouetted in the soft pink mood lighting, people squeezed together on low-slung sofas, tables in arm's reach groaning with drinks.

“Welcome, sir,” said a kimono clad, exceedingly pretty waif of indeterminate sex, waving him to the one empty sofa, like it'd been reserved.

He felt ridiculous squeaking across the marbled floor in his cheapo trainers, shorts and T-shirt combo just all wrong, Von Eil's Third World paper taunt coming back to him as he perused the ridiculously expensive drinks menu, like the Yank had wanted to undermine him. Coconut Island had morphed into the Upper East Side but this was Manhattan with an undercurrent as he peered out through the gloom, flinching as he noticed most sofas were peopled with multiracial couples, older white men with Thai twentysomethings, male and female, the men's creeping, everywhere hands as if they were attempting to smother their hosts. This wasn't a backpacker crowd, not enough moolah in that, he guessed, but it wasn't the Upper East Side either. No, Dan thought, stomach spasming, this was more like having stumbled into some debauched scene from a horror film. But the American had

wanted him to see this, a place where the privileged preyed on the desperate, to signal he was bloody untouchable.

“Evening.”

“Oh, erm, hi,” he said, finally looking up at the interruption, having been fixated on what was happening on the adjoining table, a man of bovine proportions almost clambering onto his slender mate.

“Mind if I join?”

“No, not at all. I’m just a bit...”

“Don’t be a bit anything, this is Thailand, my love. Amazing Thailand, as the advertising spiel goes, but all that glitters, innit. Nigel, Nigel Monroe,” he said, accent a strange amalgam of Cockney and camp.

“Dan,” he said, looking at the craggy face, the gin-coloured hair, watery eyes, as if older than time but the smile, the drink he was brandishing indicated he was very much alive, knew exactly what was going on. “What do you...”

“No, uh-uh. Don’t ask anyone what they do here. A journalist should know they could get the wrong answer.”

“How do you...”

“How about you listen for once? You’re a young lad, a nice-looking young lad an’ all. I’m a business associate of the Unquiet American, and his nibs told me all about you. Just between us, love, he’s a bit of a you-know-what but needs must,” he said, taking a gulp of his drink.

“What kind of business?”

“Look around you, dear, it ain’t rocket science. You’re a clever boy. I’ve read some of your pieces in the Daily but don’t fly too close to the sun. You never heard of the Thailand darkness?”

“What’s that?”

“This isn’t paradise lost, it’s hell, just a hall of mirrors. And the darkness, it’s the sunset in the East, have you noticed how it goes dark in the blink of an eye and then it’s just impenetrable. You thirtysomethings, listen to your elders.”

“I’m twenty-bloody-nine, by the way. Here, take my

business card, you know, if you think of anything,” he said, handing it to Monroe with a quivering hand.

“Much obliged.”

“There’s one question you can answer, do you know a Chalerm?”

“Dear, did you not listen? I’m not going anywhere near there. If you want to keep those good looks, don’t get involved in any of this. I did, and look what ‘appened to this,” he said, pointing to his visage and unleashing a smile that revealed a set of craggy, yellowing tombstone-like teeth.

Nigel clinked his drink, then propelled himself up with raggedy arms, offering him a little wave as he went, an enigmatic smile remaining on his haggard face. The music continued, from some suit-clad pianist far off in a darkened corner as though lending an air of civility to this abomination, like the perfumed scent on the air but the whole place reeked, and if debauchery had a smell, this was it. Peering back through the gloom, Dan couldn’t make out whether the companions of the white daddies were drunk or worse, though he really didn’t want to let his imagination run. It could lead him back to that place, London, the pub, the drinks, pint after pint, him staggering to the car, driving, swerving, then bang...

He got up, swaying with the whisky, following the sign to the toilet, next to which he saw a lift that led up to “residences”. So this was some kind of high class knocking shop, and the American didn’t care who knew, was proud of the fact, advertised it even. Dan blinked away the brightness as he entered the palatial facilities. Standing at the sink dousing his face, a uniformed man approached from behind, soft hands going to his shoulders but he managed to shake him off, while his eyes wandered to a big basket of condoms, every clue like a damning bit of evidence to uncover where he really was.

Re-entering the club and heading back to the sofa, he looked up at the ceiling, noticing a light blinking. Another CCTV camera. He shook his head resignedly, seeing they

were everywhere. Why hadn't the likes of the police-general thought of CCTV when discussing Bill and Corrine's movements on the night of their murder, which were apparently a mystery? They'd ended up on that desolate stretch of beach as though they'd been parachuted in, and he already wondered how such a small place could contain so many secrets.

Dan waved over the kimono-clad server, and they sashayed across with a smile, as if waiting to be summoned. He was aware that despite Von Eil's invitation, his whole visit was being stage managed, like there was some invisible hand just behind the scenes, something lurking just the other side of the curtain.

"Sir, what I can do for you?"

"I'd like another drink and, oh, er..." he said, whipping out his wallet, laying down bills. "I need some information."

"Same again with the drink?" they said, smile widening into a monstrous grimace, waving away the money, hands splayed, nails so long they were like talons.

"Did you see Bill and Corrine, the British couple..."

The server put one long-nailed finger to his lips, then drew it slowly across Dan's throat and he gulped back words that simply died, watching how the once beautiful vision had morphed into a grotesque, wondering about the bad spirits on the island. Had the backpackers done something to upset the equilibrium, created bad karma and paid the ultimate price?

Distracted, he watched on as the foursome on the sofa adjoining his staggered to their feet, *farang* having to hold their paramours up with one of the former looking over at him and he was fixated by the shark-like eyes, fat tongue poking out the side of the man's mouth as his expression turned into a sickening smile. He finally turned away but saw the server was coming back, no smile this time, sans drink, and he felt the sweat prickle under his armpits, seep down his back, despite the ice-cold air conditioning.

"My boss, Mr Todd, says you've got to leave. Now."

Dan didn't reply, couldn't, tongue as if welded to the roof off his desert dry mouth, but he managed to scramble to his feet, looked up again at the camera blinking, imagining the Yank somewhere in the bowels of the building just watching and he gave a one-finger salute before marching leadenly to the exit. The door swished open, and he luxuriated in the blast of hot air, backpackers slovenly sitting around on beanbags slurping from buckets, ocean surf almost phosphorescent in the background in a facsimile of the tropical idyll. But Dan knew more than ever, that's all it was, though substitute facsimile for sham. The image from that dusty, stifling room in the temple hit him again, the stench, the cloud of flies, that black ravine in Billy Boy's forehead. He knew there was something he had to do but heard the phone ping, and neurotically checked the message.

Call me when u get to Bangkok, Chalerm x

He shuddered again. It was like someone was anticipating his movements before he even decided what he was going to do next. Was it all the mystique of the East or just his mind playing bugging tricks? Dan knew he was a journalist and was meant to be dealing in facts but all those ghost stories whipped up by Som, when she suddenly stopped dead and said she could feel a bad presence, the cold that came with it, it no longer felt like hokum. Nor did Police-General Peeklong's warning when he'd pointed to the blackened jungle and, remembering the half angel, half devil tattoo on Chalerm's neck, the *farang's* shark eyes in the club, it was like something had been stirred.

But he kept going, away from Coco Bananas, following the shore, the thud of the music getting more distant, the backpacker crowd thinning to nothing like they were scared to venture further than the scattering of bars because just the other side was the death site. He passed the final lamppost before everything dissolved into darkness, a wooden stake driven into the sand with a flickering lantern atop as though marking out the last of civilisation, noticing for the first time

a camera winking at him, realising with a start that jagged through him it must've caught the demise of Bill and Corrine, the killer. The fact that those horrifying images were just sitting there waiting to be discovered meant his next question to the bungling, disinterested police-general was already written for him.

He hit the curve that he knew led to the headland, the wind having got up, just the sound of the breeze beginning to howl in his ears, that and the chattering of his teeth, the waves churning and spitting up at him, like the calm on this part of the island had been forever upended. Dan nervously glanced back, the lights of Coco Bananas way off in the distance, then up at the jungle but it offered nothing save an impenetrable black, no Chalerm to place a hand on his shoulder this time, offer a smile. But he carried on, heart battering out of his chest as he noticed he was following two sets of footprints, not far from the surf, guessing they were fresh. He bit his lip. The booze had boosted him up earlier, but he was uncoordinated, needing more and the ringing in his ears made him jump, the clanging of his phone, giggling uncontrollably as he whipped it vibrating out of his pocket, though his eyes were glued to the screen at an unknown number. Dan answered the call, twisted his head one way then the other trying to hear against the breeze, sensing someone at the other end as he yelled into it but only met by silence, then a thud in his back.

It'd catapulted him into the sand belly up, breaths exploding out of him, winded, unable to move, someone blinding him with a torch but blinking it away he could only make out vague features, though the head seemed distorted, ghoulish, a pair of otherworldly eyes spearing through his. He attempted to get up, but a kick sent him into the foetal position. Pain reverberated through him, mouth full of water, sand, Dan spitting blood as he flailed in the surf, body shuddering at the shock of the sea and all the while just the wind in his ears, the waves and the crunch of the pounding, heel of a foot

stamping into him, then a fist raining down again and again and again. The agony of the beating arced through his body in a crazy zig-zag from the tip of his toes to the top of his head, assailant floating off into the gloom like an apparition as a darkness descended, the silence came.

Chapter 3

Dan's face reflected in the plane's window was swollen, misshapen, like some odd exotic fruit going rotten on a tropical beach and he was trembling at the fractured memories of what'd happened the night of the beating, palms leaking sweat, the danger he felt he was in as though pinning him to the seat. So far in his head, splitting with a thumping migraine, he didn't see the concrete sprawl of Bangkok coming closer and closer. But peering out again, trying to distract himself, in one of the far corners of the little porthole was what appeared to be smoke, and he winced with pain as he twisted his neck, zeroing in. Yep, several blackened plumes were belching out, a violent orange swathe of flames clearly visible too, like the city was burning.

He knew the Red Shirts – the so-called democracy movement – had barricaded themselves in around key parts of the capital to protest, setting themselves up in direct confrontation with not only the military government but the royalist Yellow Shirts. It looked like they were literally razing their own city to the ground, a civil war raging in all but name, Dan knowing you only had to scratch the surface and the place was completely rotten underneath, the reality most tourists never really saw. But he knew Bill and Corrine had, and while it was too late for them, they needed justice, a thought that nagged away, needled him as constantly as the flowering fear.

He flagged down a taxi outside the airport terminal. Som had been insistent he go home, said Max was worried sick, though the missus didn't mention how she felt about it all. Funny that. His week's enforced break in a Samui hospital hadn't really made the heart grow fonder, though he'd played down the battering, put it down to a drunken brawl, didn't

dare say he was ambushed by something that he could only recall as otherworldly, a monster, when he'd been cruising a beach after dark, always that guilty conscience. Weirdly, Som believed in all that supernatural stuff. He hadn't until it happened, but it was beginning to mimic the marriage, which had become a bloody horror show. Too much talk about bad spirits from the police-general and the like had seeped into his brain, though the pinging of his phone distracted him, wincing again, numerous broken ribs can do that, struggling to get the mobile out of his pocket.

Call me! Lerm

The boy was nothing if not insistent and odd how they were so familiar. He was Lerm now, rather than Chalerm, though he hadn't answered one of his numerous other texts. He would, though, because the need to see the lad again gripped him like his addiction to booze, despite the fact he punched the taxi seat as he thought about it, familiar self-hatred gnawing at his stomach. It led him to wonder whether he should pull in at a bar on the way to the Daily, so he didn't have to think even though he knew Little Fucker from Oz would make a beeline for his drinks cabinet anyway, never needing much encouragement.

He noticed Mr Taxi eyeing him oddly in the rearview, probably thinking he was just another fucked up, *ting tong* – crazy – *farang* gone native, laughing to himself despite the pain it induced as he wasn't far wrong.

"Traffic, traffic," said the driver, still with that sideways glance.

"Red Shirts crazy," he replied.

"Yellow Shirts same, same."

They both laughed, and Dan saw that as the whole point; this country was even baffling to its own population, what chance did anyone else have of making sense of it, he thought, as the taxi drew to a complete standstill. Looking out the window, he could see myriad queues of traffic on the dizzying concrete lines of spaghetti that constituted the city's

highway system, though system too organised a word for chaos. Looking up, the sky was black, the blaze apparently ripping through downtown and blotting out even the Bangkok sun, the sound of wailing sirens, helicopters clattering above as if signalling the end of days, and Dan drew his parched tongue over sandpaper-like lips.

“Quicker to walk,” he said, handing the driver a sheaf of notes after they’d remained stationary for ten minutes.

Exiting the cab, he coughed as the acrid smoke filled his lungs, looking up at burning debris floating down like confetti. Approaching Ekamai corner, a popular Buddhist shrine, he doubted anyone would be lighting incense or offering up a prayer today as just behind it a shopping mall was ablaze and a few hundred metres or so further along a cheering, baying mob, dressed in red. A mixture of police and troops encircled them, guns terrifyingly trained, as though just awaiting an order, though they were once removed from protesters cowering behind a pathetically makeshift barricade of anything from burnt-out vehicles to shopping trolleys, the latter from the nearby supermarket that’d been ransacked. A barricade that could probably have taken just a single JCB to dismantle.

Dan shook his head, strode on but couldn’t take his eyes off the hatred on the faces, the Red Shirts screaming insults at the authorities, expressions contorted by something so visceral you could almost touch it, while the uniform clad rank and file snarled back, fingers looking itchy on triggers. So, this was Amazing Thailand, the one the tourist brochures were always going on about? Yet somehow everything was co-existing, he thought, swiping at the sweat dripping from his brow, noticing his hands were filthy, coated in ash, glancing at the unmoving traffic, inexplicably serene look on most drivers’ faces, despite the fact they could be there for what felt like forever in this conflict without end, resolution. That was the two sides of the place, of course, but he felt brutality would always win by its very nature.

He wondered when, not if, the call would come down to

shoot, knowing every other protest in this country had come to a bloody end, thinking of Som and Max, how his selfish act of running away led them all here but knowing he had no distance left to run, as his favourite bloody Blur song went. Getting out his phone again, he was about to call her, then thought better of it, she'd guilt trip him into coming home, for want of a better word because it didn't feel like that was where his heart was, knowing instead he had work to do, drinks to drink. Yes, he needed his fix before he could face the office, Liff.

Everyone had a little nook and cranny where they felt safe, where they could seek sanctuary, even in a city as sprawling and impenetrable as Bangkok. Dan smiled as he saw the inviting glow of neon and jogged awkwardly up the street despite wincing at his crumpled body—morning, yet at Wong's Bar it always seemed beer o'clock. He ducked through the doorway like a fugitive, the place opposite his crumbling apartment block, desperate not to be seen but guiltily thinking Max had already been deposited at school probably wondering forlornly where Daddy was, though he guessed Som was relieved he wasn't around as it meant they didn't have to talk, as talking equalled an argument given the now binary nature of their bloody marriage.

"Your face," said the wrinkled bar owner, peering at him through a fug of cigarette smoke, slumped behind the counter as if waiting to serve, like it was the most natural thing in the world given it was just gone eleven o'clock.

"Don't," he said, putting a finger to his lips, knowing the guvnor had seen enough in this city to realise when no conversation was needed, when it would actually seem rude, an intrusion on drinking time.

The man opened a large Chang, passed it to him, the ice-cold bottle like balm in his hands as Dan plopped himself down in his favourite leather armchair, one he knew too well. It was so old it'd probably been retro first time around, its innards spilling out like that of an old teddy bear, but it felt

just as comforting the way it wrapped around his body. Blinds drawn as they always were, lolling there in the murk, closing his eyes he breathed in the smell of the place, air thick with the aroma of booze and fags, sweat and he never wanted to leave. It reminded him of when he was a kid, sitting in the Saturday flicks, in that mildewed old cinema in dreary south London, wishing the film didn't have to end, that he could stay in the dark forever. But it always ended.

A faint smile came to his lips as he drew his battered body up the steps of a nondescript office building abutting a six-lane highway, again of snarled traffic, the security guard at the door throwing him a knowing salute despite his dishevelled state. He breathed in, the bitter vinegary smell of newsprint filling his nostrils, feeling his heart thumping but letting out an apprehensive sigh, a mixture of excitement and anxiety, the usual when he walked through the doors of the Daily when he was onto a story, glad he'd preloaded at Wong's to take the edge off, extra spring in his painful step.

Entering the newsroom, the place was lit up so bright it felt like an operating theatre, and he shielded his eyes, which were stinging from the smoke-filled streets. It was still fairly quiet, early in the day, most reporters were sniffing out stories, while the editors and layout mob wouldn't be in till later after they'd slept off hangovers, ready to put tomorrow's paper to bed, if not themselves. The clocks on the wall always made him laugh – London, New York, Los Angeles, Paris – but Bangkok slap bang in the middle like the centre of the universe.

“Well, well, well, if it isn't young Dan. You see, they're burning the place to the ground out there, but quite the yarn you've got for us too, mate,” said Liffio, having glanced up from today's paper on his lap, perennial cigarette on, feet atop the desk.

“Do you think there’s anything in that bad spirits guff? Ghosts?”

“Listen, son, that shit sells in the local Thai language rags... Wow, you took a beating, look at that face. And you weren’t no oil painting before. Blow me down.”

“It’s just the police-general was talking about bad spirits...”

“Nah, we deal in black and white. Look, give me one fact you’ve learnt about the case that’s not common knowledge. Juicier the better,” he said, getting up, shuffling over to a drinks cabinet, handing Dan a glass of muddy brown liquid so full it was sloshing over the sides.

“Not a fact, but I heard Bill was gay. That they weren’t a couple.”

“Bingo! The boy done good. That’s where you start, mate. And that Von Eil who owns Coco Bananas, where our two backpacking *farang* were supposedly shooting the shit before they met the old grim reaper, has form. Up to his neck in all sorts of shenanigans.”

“Like?”

“I have a source. A Mike Smale. He hangs out in these types of places. Queer as a coot but she’s an old gossip. He’ll fill you in, but young Dan, watch your back, if you know what I mean,” said Liffó, dour, craggy face lighting up with a smile as if for the first time.

“Cheers,” he said, taking the proffered business card.

“And, Dan, get to work. We want to get ahead of the big boys, your Sky News’s, your BBCs. We’re on the ground. No excuses. Pull out all the stops.”

He sat down at his desk, fingering Smale’s business card, one of the sturdier ones he’d seen, proper gold embossed lettering too, though Dan had also learnt the fancier here often meant the more fake. It brought to mind Von Eil and Coco Bananas, the whole damn country for that matter, set up like some elaborate deception; the more inviting it all looked, the bigger the con. But ripping away the inexplicably drawn

blinds, looking out the window, he shook his head, no hiding what was going on from his vantage point several storeys up, the place was burning, the Thais at war with each other, though he knew it wouldn't stop the planeloads of tourists as it probably only made a line or two in their Daily Mails, if that. Bloody hell, Little Fucker from Oz was more intent on leading about two white kids from the Home Counties dying than what was affecting the country right outside his window.

Dan turned away from the carnage outside, only to glance at the TV, BBC News 24, right on cue some reporter stood grim-faced plonked in the middle of a white sand beach, *the* beach, palms swaying in the background, blue sea, so picaresque yet he knew the truth, recoiling from the scene, sensing the sick feeding frenzy about to begin. He lit up and refocused on the blank cursor on his computer monitor, an ache twisting at his guts, knowing there was a story to be written but no idea how. The shrill ringing of the phone in his pocket shook him out of his trance. Som, again. He killed the call, instead selecting Lerm's last text.

“Where and when?” he typed, shaking his head, like he'd given in to temptation again, closed his eyes, sucking the cigarette smoke deep down, finally exhaling, refocusing, that blank cursor still staring at him as Liffa had emerged from his office, the Aussie prowling the newsroom.

He jumped on the Skytrain as Lerm had instructed, right through the burning heart of the city, but the elevated railway was one thing the protesters couldn't barricade. People were still going about their business, high-so women dressed to do lunch, businessmen, laptops under arms, marching to meetings, old aunties welded to shopping bags after having been to market, all to his bafflement, imagining similar pitched battles on the streets of London. It'd bring the damn nation to its knees. Yet when they passed the scene of the blaze here,

the bloody protest, most people didn't even look, expressions unchanged. Maybe if they looked, they were somehow complicit but Dan believed they were even more guilty for not looking, for letting this disorder flourish, it was the ultimate in turn the other cheek, just like the silence of Coconut Island, the mafia like omerta.

He looked up at the stunning chrome and glass structure in front of him, apparently shaped like a grain of rice, nestled pleasingly next to one of the city's few green spaces – Benchakitti Park. An immaculately turned-out doorman nodded him through the entrance of Phrom Phong Tower, his gold braded cap glinting in the sun. Entering the perfumed lift, he pressed thirty-five as instructed, fingers leaving a slick of sweat on the polished glass panel. His stomach lurched as he was whisked upwards, wetness trickling down his back, licking his whisky coated lips, having to have another couple beforehand to take the edge off.

“Mr Dan, we meet again,” said Chalerm, waving at him from down the atmospherically lit corridor.

“How'd you...”

“The guard man let me know you'd arrived. I like to be forewarned.”

Their eyes awkwardly met and he couldn't look away, feeling like he was sinking further and further into the luxurious shagpile carpet, struggling along, body still crumpled from the beating but noticing in his peripheral vision the paintings on hallway walls, gleaming fixtures and fittings, the whole place designed to intimidate, screaming money.

“Hi,” he said, embracing at the threshold, the touch of the warm, silky smooth skin sending a thrill through him again, the one he'd felt at the beach that night and he tried to conceal the fact he was gently shaking, fixating on that half angel-demon tattoo again.

“Jeez, what happened to your face? That handsome face. You cold too? Let's take a seat outside and you tell Uncle Lerm all about it.”

He led Dan through a sun-drenched living room, which, like the hallway, seemed to drip with expensive accoutrements, all so tastefully done of course. Sinking down into the most comfortable of chairs he took in the view, the breeze ruffling his hair like a loving caress, expansive balcony seemingly covering one side of the entire building.

“Gin tonic?”

“How’d...”

“Oh, shush, I’m psychic,” he said, playful little giggle, that eye contact again.

He looked down to get his bearings but assumed all the nastiness was going on in the opposite direction. Out of sight, out of mind again, thinking how insulated Lerm was from it all, even the air felt purer, cooler up here, the archetypal ivory tower.

“You sure you’re okay? You look, I dunno, distracted,” said the boy.

He shook his head and listened to the sirens still wailing way down below. Who wouldn’t be bloody distracted, but Dan didn’t say anything, swigging his drink, offering a tight smile, wondering how much of himself he could offer, how much to tell, digging nails into the palm of his hand, stretching upwards trying to release some of the tension, the pain that wracked his battered body.

“All this? How old are you?” he said, motioning to the expansive apartment.

“How old you want me to be? No, kidding, I’m twenty-three, but you probably think I’m some money boy, right? Living with a rich daddy. Wrong again! Let’s just say I’m a princess. God, you’re thirsty,” he said, nodding at the empty glass. “Let me...”

“No, sit. I was beaten up on the island. I think because I was digging around. May I?” said Dan, lighting a cigarette despite trembling hands, looking at the lad, dressed in the same figure hugging fisherman’s pants and white singlet as that night, wondering if this was all rehearsed.

“You stirred up bad spirits, buddy. That island was a former prison, years ago. People sent there to rot. In Buddhism, we also believe people who are murdered become trapped somehow; they can’t get to the afterlife unless the killer’s found. The place is full of hungry ghosts. Dan, please stay away, for your own good,” Lerm said, looking over his shoulder, mixing him another drink, the perfect host.

“I saw their bodies. The police-general showed me and then said, we’re all just guests, *farang*, like we’re nothing, shit on his shoe. Doesn’t anyone bloody care? Two teenagers just died!”

Rocking, cheeks burning, he looked at Lerm but the image was blurred, distorted, a melange of colours as if filtered through a kaleidoscope, though managing to stand he lurched back inside, the lad shouting out something about directions to the toilet, though it sounded jumbled, almost incomprehensible. It was only the icy cool of the air conditioning that helped clear his muddled head, but he was swaying, uncoordinated, bumping into lacquered furniture, lavish antiquities, only managing to keep upright by leaning against a wall, taking a breath. But he needed to keep going, blundering down corridors, peering through a haze at what appeared a massive bedroom, drawn to photos of the Thai in various states of undress but artfully done, then right above the bed a colossal floor to ceiling painting in vivid colours that seemed to scarily vibrate, panoramic view from what could’ve been the veranda of Coco Bananas but might be anywhere.

The breaths were coming faster and faster and he tore himself away from the image, unable to unscramble it in his scrambled head, still unsure at what he’d seen, finally bursting into the bathroom, as if something out of a five-star hotel. Diving for the gold taps he splashed cold water over his face, then gulped it down greedily, giving himself two slaps across the chops, the feeling, some kind of strength, returning to his body, like the stress, the heat had just overwhelmed him, though Dan knew they were excuses, something was off,

awry as the insistent rapping from the other side of the door boomed in his ears.

“Did you drug my drink?” he said, having wrenched the door open but holding onto Lerm to stay upright, the lad topless now, torso glistening, lights dancing around in the background, horizon askew.

“If I drugged you, you wouldn’t still be here, buddy,” he said, laughing but a beat too late.

Dan’s brain began to shut down, so many questions dissolving, desire overtaking everything else, grabbing for the toned body, enveloped in those muscled arms now, their lips meshing, tongues entwined. His mind going black, blank, for once, euphoria flooding through his body like it was meant to be, as if he was finally living. The boy disengaged, brushed his cheek with another kiss, yanked him into the bedroom, that giggle again, the place filled with joy, them both falling panting onto the bed, pawing at each other, like they both needed more.

He’d warily checked his phone when he’d left Phrom Phong Tower, twenty-two missed calls, causing him to bite into destroyed nails, scrunching his face up as he climbed the stairs to his apartment, every one of them feeling incriminating this time of night, like even the security guard had eyed him oddly. A so-called family man out till all hours in Bangkok, well, say no more. The smell emanating off him too made Dan recoil, knowing he needed to shower, get that sickening sex stink off him before facing his wife, his son.

It wasn’t “Honey, I’m home,” not a chance. He crept into the place like a thief come to steal a family’s dreams, happy to see it was in complete darkness, a sad kind of loaded silence. Both bedroom doors in the postage-stamp sized place closed, shutting him out, thinking back to Lerm’s palace, those embraces that he’d wanted to last all night. Lighting the

way with his phone, he snapped on the telly, some Premiership football game, and he grabbed for the half-full bottle of Scotch within arm's reach, pouring a more than generous measure. Patting his pocket, something was missing, amiss, his heart beginning to thrash all over again. Simultaneously, his phone rang, noise drilling rudely through the apartment.

“Lerm?”

“Your wallet, amigo. Don’t worry it’s safe with me. Your secret’s safe with me,” he said, giggle bubbling up over the line.

“What?”

“The photos. It’s full of photos. Your wife and kid, man. Don’t worry, I know you’re gonna do the right thing. Sleep tight.”

The heat was the first thing to rile him, no icy air con here, just an electric fan, but as ever it was fighting a losing battle with the sultry Bangkok climate, particularly come sunrise. Dan had to squint through his still swollen eyes, as that very sun was piercing through the threadbare living room curtains, telly still on, showing reruns of the match he thought he passed out to last night. Glass of whisky by his elbow two-thirds full, so bloody hell he must’ve been tired. He shook his head, staggered to his feet, swigged down the booze, grimaced until the alcohol hit had him on some kind of level. He dumped the empty glass in an overflowing sink, easier to hide the evidence, though the untended mess screamed more passive aggressiveness from the wife. Putting a hand to his throbbing head, the smell of last night’s leftovers, his dinner, made him wince, but looking at the plate of food left on the counter, it seemed a metaphor for their marriage – cold and untouched.

The kitchen clock read seven o’clock, and he let out a sigh, knowing he had at least thirty minutes or so before they

emerged, the space invaders. Opening the fridge, he laughed, like his bachelor days all over again, the stereotypical half an onion going rotten and beers stacked on beers, a rancid bottle of milk stuck in the door. Shaking his head, he went to the mat to retrieve a copy of the Daily, all part of the morning routine as he slumped back onto the sofa and unfurled the paper. For once the Red Shirts v Yellow Shirts had made the front page, breathless banner headlines, though he knew why it was the splash – they’d burned down a retail outlet. “Shopping and fucking” were what boss man, the Little Ignorant Fucker from Oz, termed sexy, politics not. So reducing the fight for the future of the nation to a Dolce & Gabbana store being destroyed made perfect sense. Liffa had once said he wouldn’t run anything that made a reader “choke on their noodle soup”, particularly referring to the rotund ruling generals who could probably do with missing a meal anyway, that’s how gutless he was.

He quickly flicked through the rest of the paper, embarrassed about the lack of his byline, no mention of *the backpacker murders*, as he saw the main media outlets were now referring to them as, like it was some Hollywood schlock horror, all it needed was sodding popcorn. Dan bit at his chewed to the quick nails and, despite his addled head, he was ashamed, feeling pathetic that he hadn’t written anything. Absolutely he owed it to them, Bill and Corrine, that silent beating he’d taken on the beach unable to erase the image of the pair rotting in a dusty room at the temple. He needed to put it right if he could just bloody apply himself, punching at the sofa, again and again and again.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” said Som, looking bleakly out the bedroom door, hair a bird’s nest tangle.

“Nice to see you, too.”

“Hey, you’ve been away how long? You didn’t come to bed last night, and now you’re having a fight with our furniture. And, my Buddha, look at your face.”

“I told you...”

“Dan, love, this country’s not like England. There’s bad things just out there. Human life’s worth nothing. Nothing,” she said, wrenching open the curtains, pointing at the still smoking skyline.

“I got into a stupid fight about a drink, that’s all.”

“Promise me you’ll be careful,” she said, finally easing next to him on the sofa, stroking his thinning hair.

“I need to do my job,” he said, rapping the front page of the Daily.

“That’s a no, then. I told you, this country...”

“Som, for God’s sake, how did we end up in this country, *your* country? This was your choice,” he said, brushing her hand away.

“Mister, we didn’t have a choice, remember. If you hadn’t been drink driving, if you hadn’t run over...”

“No, we’re not bloody going back there. I refuse to talk about this right now. How dare you bring it up!”

“Dad! You’re home. Mummy told me you were in an accident,” said Max, having poked his head out the other bedroom door, bouncing on the soles of his feet, smile plastered over his face, oblivious to the morning storm.

“Son, son, come ‘ere.”

He breathed Max in, hugged him like he never wanted to let go but all the while he was fixated on the scene outside the window, the bruised background of the city like some harbinger of doom but it was a possibility at the same time, freedom from the stifling living room, the four walls that always felt like they were closing in. The ringing of his phone on the coffee table posing yet another question amid the most awkward of silences yet Dan didn’t want to dare look at the screen as he knew full well who it was, last night coming back to him like a head-on collision as it finally rang off.

“Max, love, let your daddy sort himself out. You can see him later. Get ready for school. Five minutes, okay.”

“Your face,” said the kid almost accusingly but kissing him on the forehead as he scooted off.

He watched as Max disappeared back into the bedroom. His smile, the little kiss, it was just all so innocent, but he saw how far from that he was in Som's glance, like she could read his mind. Dan blushed as the phone rang again, insistent ringing drilling through his head, the whole damn flat.

“At least someone wants you. Come on, you better answer that. You stink of alcohol, by the way,” she said, padding across the floor, shutting the bedroom door with an almost silent click.

He saw from caller ID it was Chalerm, course it was, the smell of boy still all over him like a slick, the lad's last words echoing in his head but even as he discarded the call, looking around the cell-like room, thinking of the palatial apartment, the silken sheets, the smooth skin, it was escape.

Chapter 4

He ran after the lady selling the votive candles, his face contorted by the effort, from the endless Bangkok heat, but she offered him a beatific smile, like she didn't know the bloody half of it. It brought him back to the last time Som had looked at him, a mixture of disgust and disappointment before she closed the bedroom door with a horrible finality. Dan held up four fingers to the woman, grabbed a hundred-baht note from his pocket and she handed over the candles. Returning to the little spirit house outside his flats, he took the cheapo lighter out of his pocket and, despite trembling hands, lit one for Bill, one for Corrine, another for his marriage and a final candle for Max. He glanced from the tremulous flames to the building where he lived, poverty of which felt like a punch to the gut, someone having daubed "Bangkok Hilton" on the side in blood red paint like some sick joke, meant to signify the nickname for the city's biggest prison – Aka the Monkey House – not the middling hotel chain. It did look like a jail though, he thought with a sigh, grilles up at the windows, dreary washing hanging out of every orifice on plastic poles, the exterior a depressing battleship grey. Even the name – Sri Bumphen Apartments – was a joke because the rabbit hutch rooms didn't resemble any apartment he'd ever seen, but the fugitive life hadn't afforded them many options, nor did the salary at the Daily.

He walked down the street, the usual *soi* dogs growling at him, like they sensed he was guilty, Dan dodging the putrefying rubbish stacked up, flinching at the rats scurrying around expectantly, super-sized cockroaches in their wake looking for any leftovers. Observing the backpackers beginning to fill up the little bars and restaurants set him wondering about

whether this was where the likes of Bill and Corrine had started out, imagining their youthful enthusiasm, the fake smiles, balmy weather, beer insulating them from the Third World squalor all around. He'd lost his Bangkok virginity, however, the attraction having withered and died, unfortunately Dan had seen through the scam. As a tuk tuk driver pulled up beside him expecting a good fare from the latest *farang* to have found paradise, instead of returning the lopsided smile, answering the "where you go?", he aggressively waved him away.

It was dark by the time he reached the end of the street, still chilling how quickly the darkness came down in the East, swallowing everything in its wake, particularly on those southern islands, and he shivered. The streets of the city were very much alive, however, and he choked on the rush-hour fumes, cars forming a long metallic stream, though it was static, unmoving. He checked his watch, knowing he was five minutes away, shoulders relaxing, on time for once, though the Daily deadline gnawed at his stomach, almost tasting the drink now, relief.

He breathed out, the neon sign spelling out Paradise Hotel dead ahead, though it looked as far away from paradise than Dan could imagine. An odd rendezvous, but then Smale, the source Liffó had given up, had insisted, reckoned he loved "slumming it" in this part of town, the old Bangkok. He knew that unfortunately for some it was all they could afford but he was also aware this place, along with its surfeit of sex tourists, also catered to poverty porn, those that wanted to look but not be touched, voyeurs took in, they'd say *experience*, the shitty sights and then dust down their linen suits, take a cocktail or two on the veranda of the Mandarin Oriental before updating Facebook.

"Oh, so you must be Danny Boy?" said a man as soon as he'd entered the lobby. "Don't worry, I have a trained eye."

"Yep, yep, Mike Smale, right?" he replied, the man's hand feeling silky smooth as they shook, taking in the

well-preserved fifty-something, his tan complexion, mane of thick grey hair and silk cravat.

He followed Smale's lead, and they wandered into a dimly lit bar, a place where every conceivable transaction seemed to be playing out in its gloomy corners, more *farang* preying on locals. Dan drew a tongue over cracked lips, heart beginning to thrum in his chest, palms slick with sweat, fearing he was about to get another schooling in just how depraved the place was, though the relaxed expression on his companion's face said this was all normal, almost a mirror image of the Unquiet American.

"So a journalist, eh? Francisco filled me in. One of his brightest recruits, despite being a bit wet behind the ears. But I heard you took a bit of a beating. Be careful."

"And, er, what's your line of work?" he said, legs a mass of fidgeting under the table but stifling a laugh at Liffó's real name, the way it made him seem almost human.

"Dear boy, I have my fingers in a lot of pies, shall we say. I work part time for the oppo, the Bangkok Post. I'm in vice, that's crime reporting to you, but this town's all about vice. I live a life of grime," he said with a chuckle, signalling for the waiter, almost breathing seductively in the lad's ear. "Whisky set okay for you?"

"Anything really..."

"Easily pleased. But let's cut to the chase. You want information. Not sure I can give you much, though those backpacker murders weren't down to a fight."

"How'd you know?"

"Call it Auntie Smale's intuition. I've been here long enough to know. It's not some lowlife who did it, it's someone connected. A bit of rough would've been arrested by now, locked up, the key thrown away. That's Thailand, my boy, not what you see in the tourist brochures. You pay enough money here and you get away with anything."

"So you think it's something to do with Todd Von Eil?" he said, chugging the whisky, Smale's educated but fruity

English accent weirdly intimidating.

“My, someone’s thirsty. Watch my lips, though. That’s not what I said. But the Yank is up to his neck in all sorts. Likes to play the field, ladyboys, straight up boys. Well, not straight, but you know what I mean. Nothing wrong with that but something not right about that one. He’s got a latest plaything, very good-looking, young lad, though he seems to have some sort of hold over ‘em. Very possessive. Tut, tut. Can’t remember Little Miss Thing’s name.”

“Charlerm?”

“You’re stabbing in the dark, dear boy,” he said, giving him an odd wink. “I spend part of my time in Fun City, part of it on Coconut Island, and nothing is as it seems. There’s an old Thai saying about the darkness swallowing the sun. No way back from that, so be careful, but if you really want to find out what happened, you need to get back down there, make a nuisance of yourself, upset people.”

“What is this place?” he said, glancing around the bar, horribly hungry expressions on the faces of the *farang* like they wanted to devour their companions.

“Ever hear of The Serpent, Charles Sobhraj, the Bangkok serial killer? Used poison, then strangulation. This was his pick-up joint,” he said, laughter exploding out of him.

He stumbled out the bar, instinctively checked his phone, several missed calls from Som, surprised she was still interested in his whereabouts given the look she’d given him this morning. Though he feared the missus was just gathering evidence, a mounting inventory of his unavailability, his all too frequent disappearing acts. Work had covered a multitude of absences, an easy excuse, but Dan knew Som was bright; she was catching on, no longer blinded by his supposed ambition. God, she read the paper too, where was his bloody byline?

There was also a text. Lerm. Again. Fingers greasy with sweat as he opened it, something about “doing the right thing”. He’d always chased before, frightened people away,

but this was the opposite, and his breathing started to ramp up. It was like when Lerm had given him *the look* in that palatial apartment and he'd gorged like a starving man. What the hell did the lad expect him to do though, he thought, chomping down on his nails, pain zinging through him, stomach spasming. Was he meant to give up everything for a one-night stand?

He'd been disgusted by the Paradise, some of the gay couples he'd seen in there. What did all of this bloody make him? Som and Max gave him that veneer of normality, the hard-working journalist, family man, a role he thought he could inhabit for years but around every corner there seemed a sign that he couldn't and he felt it was a sickness, the looking at men, the sizing them up, the imagining without their clothes on. It was a sickness without cure, but he knew deep down that his marriage wasn't the answer, yet the alternative meant blowing up his life.

Dan lit a cigarette, Falling Rain, the cheap shit local ones, still a long way from payday, smoke rasping through his lungs. The traffic of earlier had dissipated, just taxis and tuk tuks ferrying *farang* from hotels to shopping and fucking, maybe the two one and the same in this town. His attention was drawn to an old local tottering along on a sit up and beg bicycle, image framed by the crumbling shophouses and he could almost imagine when this place was so much more sedate, innocent. The Bangrak district, old Bangkok, as Smale had termed it, was backpacker central before Khao San Road exploded, the latter phenomenon partly thanks to Alex Garland's *The Beach*. Old school Bangkok may have been home to the likes of Sobhraj, but he guessed back then the place wasn't jaded by tourists, it was all a novelty on both sides. Thirty years later, now every Tom, Dick and Hannah wanted the full Gap Yah experience with added authenticity and it had become corporatised, an industry. He'd seen it in the eyes of many locals, though, the hatred because they had enough of their own problems, didn't want the intrusion.

Maybe with the country imploding around them, they simply didn't want to suffer that most feared Southeast Asian state – a loss of face.

Having been lost in thought, a young man approaching, half dressed in what counted for slinky bar gear here, caused him to stir, dragging deeper on his cigarette. The lad glanced shily away when they passed one another, Dan craning round to have a last look but then he spat on the ground, Max's insistent smile coming back to him from this morning. That was Bangkok, a temptation around every bloody corner, not his fault and as if to emphasise the point he was blinking away a raft of neon that assailed him, music booming from the plethora of competing bars, sensory overload. Shaking his head, he looked down at his watch, as though he could hear the insistent ticking, knowing Bill and Corrine's bodies were going cold, skin papery thin, translucent, he needed that story.

On the fringes of Lumpini Park now. He peered through the railings, imagining the lithe lads lighting up in the shadows, waving their cigarettes like beacons, offering smiles as if the sweetest of candy but Bill and Corrine couldn't wait and he sighed, knowing he'd made a silent pledge to them in that dark, dusty temple. The trees in the park rustled in the light breeze like they had on the beach that awful night, when he'd felt the island's darkness seeping up from his toes, infecting his entire body and he jumped as a scaly monitor lizard the length of two dogs suddenly waddled across the pavement in front of him, like some terrible omen. He watched stock still as it eyed him dismissively and then expertly crawled through the railings into the gloom beyond, to join the rest of Lumpini's wildlife.

He dodged the scantily clad female prostitutes, the garishly made up ladyboys looking to entice kerb crawlers, probably appearing half inviting in the dimly lit streetlights but up close Dan grimaced at the desperation of it all, the way they hissed at him as if they sensed he wouldn't be the least bit interested. Unsettled, he upped his pace as he hurried past

the next obstacle, the whole city on edge, as if it had a collective sleep problem but the encampment of Red Shirts emitted only a quiet murmur like they were saving their energy for the final showdown. And on seeing the lights blazing from the office block that housed the Daily, he finally breathed out.

The usual hubbub, the mad freneticism provoked by the production deadline was absent, seemingly the whole newsroom gathered round the TV. He was at the back of the crowd but peering above the bobbing heads he could see the BBC News 24 journalist, usual Oxbridge type dressed in the standard linen suit issued for Far East postings, standing on the same stretch of beach he'd been on days ago, though this was lit by industrial scale lighting, as though a film set. His unwavering, authoritative voice telling the viewer that two Thai fishermen had been arrested for the killing of Bill and the rape and murder of Corrine, accompanied by a sad shaking of heads of all those around the telly. Dan's stomach groaned with pain and he flopped down in the nearest office chair, totally winded, slamming the desk with a fist.

"Blow me down, they always need a fall guy. Blame the lowliest in society. Let them take the flaming rap. Son, Danny, you need to get yourself back down there pronto," said Lippo, pointing a finger straight at him.

He couldn't bloody help himself. The thought of the lad, tan body against white silken sheets, and Dan had dropped everything. Told the Little Fucker From Oz, Francisco, if you were a certain Smale, that he was following a hot lead. Hot it might've been, lead it certainly wasn't, he thought, as he squirmed on a sofa at the Sheraton Grand Sukhumvit. Live jazz was spilling out from an adjacent bar, cigar smoke rising gently to the ceiling with the cool beats, a part of the city he felt an impostor even visiting. His life was two star, but this was five-star plus. If you were rich in this town, you were

mega rich; if you were poor, then you were shit on another man's shoes. Nowhere near the former, but God did he want it, the sweat sliding down his back attesting to how much because he knew the key to it, the thing he desired the most, had just walked through gilt-edged revolving doors. And as far as Dan didn't belong, Lerm had an aura that set the air crackling around him, a uniform-clad minion already in attendance, firing off the requisite smile, the lad discreetly returning the gesture as he delved a hand into an immaculately tailored pocket and drew out several crisp notes, handing the tip over, second nature. He wore it so well, and Dan blushed as soon as their eyes met, taking in the beautifully ironed white shirt, one more button undone than was strictly necessary, the dark blue chinos, paired with what were no doubt designer slip-ons. He hated preppy but he wanted it so bad, cursing his appearance in a mirrored wall, fiddling with his own shabby attire as the boy approached, each step like the ticking down of an invisible clock to some impending doom but so thrilling, even allowing himself a jerky smile.

There was the hug and he breathed him in, feeling like he belonged. This was actually home, maybe for the first time ever. Disengaging, he noticed people in the lobby looking at them and he'd normally hate being stared at for what he was but this time Dan actually luxuriated in it, as though the feeling of want overrode all the negatives and his head was spinning with possibilities, better than any drug hit.

He followed Lerm silently – did they need words? – to the reception desk as the lad effortlessly threw a gold card onto the counter, though glancing down it was like a bum note blighting the symphony, the name was awry, certainly not Charlerm. But the lad clocked his quizzical glance, as though he'd sensed the slight knocking off kilter of the equilibrium, putting a finger to his lips almost imperceptibly. The receptionist went through the motions; the jazz played on; that clock kept on ticking, transaction done nevertheless as the

key was handed over.

“You’re not Chalerm?” he said, as soon as they’d entered the lift, smile momentarily wiped from the lad’s face.

“It’s a nickname. Everyone in Thailand has nicknames. You’re not just a tourist, right?”

“No, it’s just that...”

“It’s not just anything, buddy. You ask too many questions. If you wanna survive in this city, you know the rules.”

“I’m a journalist, asking questions is my job,” he said with a lopsided smile as Lerm threw open the door to the sky-high penthouse apartment, floor to ceiling windows offering dizzying, panoramic views of nighttime Bangkok lit up, making him short of breath, chest tightening.

“Sit,” he said, voice several octaves lower like it was a command, pointing to a table graced with two champagne flutes, bottle of bubbly in an ice bucket, pair of cozy chairs side by side. “Fire away. What do you need to know, Mr Journalist?”

“Why are we bloody here? You have a beautiful apartment already.”

“Let’s get one thing straight: if we’re not gonna fall out, and I know you wouldn’t want that, you have to trust me.”

“So you’re not answering?” said Dan, gulping the champagne, unable to help looking down the open neck of the boy’s shirt.

“Here, is that all you want? You *farang*, you know, all the same,” said Lerm, ripping at it so the buttons popped off, revealing that built chest.

“We’re not...”

“I like you, Mr Journalist, but I’ve been freaking hurt before. You white men. Look, you’re married. That’s why I threatened to tell Som, Max. It’s insurance. If I invest the time and effort, I need insurance, like any good investor.”

“How do you know it’s Som and Max? You even know their bloody names,” he said, jumping up from his chair, dragging the lad across the table by his collar.

But an explosive push sent him flying backwards, careening into one of the bookcases that edged the room before sliding to the floor, Lerm standing over him now, face darkened by something he'd never seen, as if he was a completely different person, if he was even human.

"Shall we start again?" said the boy, features morphing back to the before, like a storm had passed, pulling Dan to his feet with one hand, shoving a glass of champagne at him with the other.

He swigged it back wordlessly, expensive vintage tasting bitter on his tongue, before he sloped off unsteadily to the bathroom. His face looked back at him from the mirror, eyes bugging, chest heaving, but maybe this is what *feeling* was like. Maybe the lad was really into him, maybe he had been seriously hurt before, and the Som and Max stuff was just Lerm being desperate to have him all to himself.

Dan listened at the gentle knocking on the door, the soft lilt of his name being uttered from those lips, earlier thunder having simply rolled away, and he smiled to himself. Yes, he remembered his biography in the paper; it mentioned his wife and son, spelled out their names, so it was a simple Google search. Nothing sinister. Everything was fine, more than bloody fine.

"Lerm, I'll be out in a sec."

Chapter 5

Lerm's voice was still imprinted on his brain, that weird mix of tonal Thai and US TV show, the rising inflection at the end as though everything was a question but the lad himself was one huge question mark. He'd spent the night nevertheless, unable to drag himself away, though in the morning when work called he didn't have a choice. The boy warned him, the "Don't go back to Coconut Island, bad shit happens there", unequivocal, yet scratching at his already sunburnt neck on the side of a dusty road, sat atop a put-putting moped it was clear he hadn't listened. The phone shrilling in his pocket set the sweat cascading from his brow, not wanting to know, though he guessed it was Som, the guilt he knew he'd drown in drink later. There was one thing he had to do first, the recurring image of which had drawn him back here, the experience that meant he felt he no longer had a say. For once, Dan was doing what his gut told him, he wasn't backing out.

He turned the accelerator, thinking of the map he'd unwrinkled on the bed in his cheapo beach bungalow, sifting back through his hungover brain to the trip with Peeklong as he began to shoot along the island's undulating, potholed roads. The glimpse of the sea through the swaying palms provided no balm as it seemed so fake, illusory, a looking-glass bloody world. Stacks of litter discarded and decomposing by the roadside were far more apt, like an epidemic of fly-tipping had broken out, evidence of an infrastructure having burst at the seams, innards spewing out.

The clacking of the pathetic little two-stroke engine morphed into a high whine as he struggled up the latest hill, though he suddenly detected a deeper throb, senses attuned to any perceived threat, his clammy hands slip-sliding on the

throttle as he checked his wing mirror. Like a mirage in the heat haze that stretched across the road behind, throwing up a swirl of a dust in its wake, a scrambler bike about three times the size of his was trailing. Its powerful engine boomed, but it was as though he was being followed at a polite distance, that beast could've easily overtaken him. He tried to concentrate on the road ahead, remain upright, zig-zagging past craters as the track deteriorated further and further till it was like something from the surface of the moon but Dan neurotically checked the mirror like he had developed some kind of tic. Opening up the accelerator fully, briefly closing his eyes in a kind of silent prayer, he stared straight ahead willing the bike on, bouncing up and down now but his heart pounded with the sound of the scrambler thudding in his ears it felt so close. Coming closer, closer, closer.

The bike was slewing all over the place with the speed, yet he snuck a look in the mirror again and even though he had to focus back on the road, he couldn't blink away the image, it was a skull, a bone white skull, eyes vacant hollows that were zeroed in on him. Dan held the handlebars to help steady his shaking body, feeling he was going to slide right off, furiously applying the brakes, lurching forward as the moped skidded to a stop. He put a shaky foot to the ground to steady himself, feeling a rush of air past his ear, the scrambler whistling by in a blur but the skull wrenched round, staring right back at him until it crested another hill. Wiping tears out of his eyes, unable to stop the trembles, he slung the bike down, sat in the shade of a tree, listened as the roar of the scrambler ebbed away, breath finally stilling.

It could've been just someone mucking around, a helmet shaped like a skull, he thought laughing, unable to stop, yet he was still shaking as he got back on the bike, started off again. All that talk about bad spirits, his beating on the beach, Lerm's warning, Som's ghost stories and Dan was unable to get away from the fact something had been stirred and he was

only riling things up further. But he knew he didn't have a choice as he spotted the reason, the rundown temple sitting right on the bend as he remembered, the blackened, shadowy jungle stretching off infinitely behind and he pattered to a stop. He dragged the bike behind a gnarled, knobby tree that stretched way up to the heavens, looking like it'd been there forever, and he wondered with a shiver what it had seen.

Dan called out as he entered the temple grounds. The stupas dulled despite the strength of the sun; everything about the place jaded, slightly off, but he was met with silence, his call only meriting nonchalant looks from the mangy cats still roaming around. He pulled at the wooden doors of the room the police-general had wrestled open, darkness spilling from inside, the roughness of the walls scraping his fingers as he fussily felt for a switch praying his eyes would adjust, almost instantaneously the smell hit and he was back to that day, he was looking at their bodies. Fiddling in his pocket, he finally located the phone, switched on the torch, table still there, where they'd lain, Bill and Corrine. Even though they'd gone, the butcher's shop stench couldn't be eliminated, and he breathed it in, leaning against the wall to steady himself, but he needed to remember, Dan wanted to feel, needed the courage to find the truth. That's why he was here.

He followed the path to the beach, the one he'd taken before, retracing his footsteps for a third time, though it felt different, the fierce tropical sun bathing everything in an almost magnesium glare. Dan glanced up at the last ornate little lamppost that demarcated this stretch of sand featuring bars, life, with the death site a few hundred metres in the distance and his stomach tightened as he could see a crowd had gathered, an expectant hub-bub filling the air as a carefully orchestrated event appeared about to begin, the Thai propensity for a bit of theatre coming to the fore, another performance. It was like

the Thai smile, which could mean a million different things, so many a book had been written about it. He shivered as it brought to mind what one veteran local reporter had told him, you needed to smile at your enemy even as you prepared to kill them.

The closer he got, the more like a film set it resembled, with arc lights rigged up, banks of cameras trained on the clown-like ringmaster in the middle. Dan recognised the shape, before he was close enough to see the face, the dumpy figure of Police-General Peeklong in the traditional brown uniform stained almost black by sweat, absurd amount of medals glinting in the light, shades glued resolutely to his face. Bustling to the front of the throng, he recognised some famous faces from the assembled international news media, most having sent their big guns. He nodded his hellos to mostly blank expressions, feeling like an impostor among what appeared his tan, relaxed colleagues and what no doubt was a plum assignment that warranted business class and hotel accommodation with soft white sheets and a pillow menu. To emphasise the point, with Peeklong about to start the woman next to him in the immaculate trouser suit and seemingly doused in Chanel No 5 had just lit a cigarette, like this was the after-dinner entertainment.

“Lady and gentleman...” he began, to various titters from the crowd, causing him to stop and adjust sunglasses that were sliding down his jowly face with the rivers of sweat, Dan almost expecting him to eject those who found it all so funny, yet his forced grin remained.

“Lady and gentleman of the press. Thanks for coming here today. Despite all the things written about this island in the last couple of weeks, we want to emphasise it is safe, Thailand is very safe and very friendly. Compared to your own countries,” he said, daring anyone to disagree, scanning the crowd, bathing them in that awful smile as if to emphasise how friendly it all was to more muffled laughter. “Get the message out that Thailand is open for business and ready to

welcome you...”

“Business, hey, all about the bloody business,” said the journalist next to him in a stage whisper, nudging him in the ribs, momentarily knocking the police-general from his PR spiel.

“Quiet! We have made two arrests. These men are guilty. Thai fishermen who were on the beach that night, playing like monkeys, drunk. They’ve already confessed,” said Peeklong, throwing his arms wide like some magician, as stage left another police officer advanced to the middle of the semi-circle formed by the press corps, towering over a pair of pathetic squat men, one manacled to each of his wrists, like they were capable of running off anywhere but it all added to the sense of drama.

Dan let out a sigh, shook his head, as he looked at the similarly sceptical expressions around him. The men were young, boys really, looking malnourished, and as he peered closer, he could see the bruising on their sallow faces, imagining the narrative of that awful night being beaten into them, putting their scrawl to anything just to make it stop. He bent double with the pain in his stomach, as some of the journalists around droned questions at Peeklong, though they themselves didn’t sound interested, convinced, Dan tuning out the stock, vague answers the police-general parroted back. And he noticed one of the fishermen catch his eye, he was crying, tears falling in big blobs on the sand in the same place blood had been spilt, Bill’s and Corrine’s, all the while Peeklong’s smile burning bright.

He remembered Bill, even in death, his solidly built body and the beefcake photos that had been in the Daily to accompany the glowing biography about the lad with his whole life ahead, who’d captained the school rugby team among many other stellar achievements. Somehow a four-foot nothing fisherman, who looked like he hadn’t eaten for a couple of months, could overpower Bill. “No way!” he wrote in his notepad as Peeklong spirited the convicts away to a waiting

4x4 like an embarrassment, engine having been constantly running, sleight of hand complete as he watched some of the other journalists earnestly doing their pieces to camera. The message was going back to living rooms around the world to concerned mums and dads that Thailand was safe for backpacking sons and daughters, killers as good as hung, drawn and quartered. Dan thought back to the image of the bloodied, bloated pair in the temple, the fisherman's tearful glance and stamped at the sand, kicking it up in great clouds.

"You okay, son?" one of his colleagues shouted behind him.

"Not okay, no," he said, turning around, addressing the vaguely familiar face who'd been holding a BBC microphone that some flunky had just ushered away, riled by the "son" reference given the reporter was around his age.

"Look at this," said the man, pointing to his phone, smiling at the tweet headlined "2 arrested in Thai backpacker slaying case".

"Lovely use of the word slaying."

"Murder's so overdone, don't you think? Variety in headlines. That's the BBC training. But it's amazing with Twitter that news is now all around the world."

"You think that's bloody news? Where's your journalistic instinct, do the BBC not teach that? Don't you think it's so pat, the way this case is all neatly tied up," Dan said, stabbing a finger in the air.

"Oh, I see what you did there. The old play on words. *Tied up*. But you seem so angry. Why? Strange kind of justice in these places, I agree, but what can one do?"

"Justice? You people just don't seem to get it. You're sodding flash jackets, someone to tie your shoelaces I expect. And you swallow the official line, but who's actually speaking for Bill and Corrine? Answer me that," he said, grabbing the guy round the collar, tanned face glowing a strange mahogany colour, and Dan gobbled into the sand before finally letting him go.

He listened to a weird spluttering refrain but simply

walked away, not wanting to respond to those overdone Oxbridge vowels, imagining the rest of the press pack putting their kit away for the last time, job done, before going for a final apéritif, a last supper in paradise before jetting home. He had work to do.

The daylight was fading fast as he knew it did in the East, gone within the blink of an eye, darkness swallowing the sun as Smale had so ominously put it. Cicadas were starting up their lament too, along with the high drone of mosquitoes in his ears, though most were undetectable, went about their business silently as the itchy lumps on his arms and legs attested. A tourist, just a tourist, and those buggers could sniff him out, sense fresh meat. And sipping another ice-cold beer under the palms, he wondered if Bill and Corrine had suffered. But that's it, every backpacker expected insect bites, some Delhi belly, even falling off their shitty rented moped if they were really unlucky, happy to put it down to a drunken escapade, another anecdote filed away for travellers' tales, to post on Facebook accompanied by a sad face – though who expected to come to paradise and go home in a wooden box?

Dan breathed out, felt his body go floppy for the first time that day, well, maybe the first time in months, probably just the effects of the alcohol but the ping of his phone was like an unwanted shot of adrenaline. He was never off, even when he so much wanted to be, the sleepless nights and zombie-like days draining him.

“Who the fuck is Lerm?” he said aloud, reading Som's message, wincing at the chunk of thumbnail he'd just bitten away, turning the mobile off.

The lad had gone ahead and told her, and he wondered if that'd make it easier in some bloody way, that constant tension gripping his shoulders actually easing. What about Max? was the question that came to mind, but the kid had been their

excuse for nearly bailing on running away to Thailand, though he hadn't really had a damn choice, either that or, well... It was like he was always putting obstacles in the way to being his authentic self. He was a coward, always had been, he thought, signalling for another beer, feeling of defeat like lead in his stomach. Backpackers were lounging around on beanbags, what, not even ten years younger than him but it was like they inhabited another dimension, the easy smiles, the laughter and just the light in their eyes, as if they'd seen something that'd given them hope. He tried not to look at them too often, otherwise he'd envy, though Coconut Island had given him a weird kind of tunnel vision, mind mostly tethered to the dark side, appropriately enough.

Dan swigged his beer, though getting up his legs felt heavy, and he wobbled to the treeline. What looked like a honeymooning couple were sat dripping all over each other ahead of a no doubt romantic dinner, and it set him thinking, then he didn't want to think anymore. He was glad of the darkness afforded by the sparse band of jungle to hide his aloneness, though he instinctively glanced this way and that, a dilapidated resort stood to his left just discernible in the gloom, many of the bungalows burnt out, long since pillaged for any fixtures and fittings that survived the inferno. A chill went through him as a snatched memory came back to him of the night he was running from Lerm on Death Beach, when he'd seen the blackened skeleton of a similarly decimated resort. He'd heard how this was a common way for landlords to get rid of unwanted tenants, raze their property to the ground and start again, though he wondered with a shudder whether any guests had been there at the time.

“Hello, handsome, how are you?”

He shook his head, pushed her gently away, garishly made-up girl looking mock affronted but barely legal in barely any clothes stood outside one of the neon-lit lean-tos that counted as bars, Dan having broken through the treeline and hit the fringes of town. Everyone was smiling, he noticed,

from the punters to the staff being pimped outside – be they men, women, ladyboys, all on the youngish side – but it didn't feel like a happy place.

“Nirvana, innit?” said one of the bargoers, lurching into his face.

But he brushed him off, taking in the scene, like some nightmare envisioned by Hogarth, neon giving the whole place a red glow, bad spirits at large. Tentatively, he knocked on the door of the police station. It all looked different by night, cop shop smack bag in the middle of it all, when in the daytime the area was a dusty void.

“Come, come, tourist. Like we discussed on the phone earlier, there's some people dying to meet you. Dying! Get it,” said the police-general, sunglasses having finally been dispensed with, black beady eyes all over him, hand in the small of his back propelling Dan quickly inside. “There are the monkeys.”

Up close, sat behind a desk chained to one another, the fishermen looked even more pathetic than they had at the beach. Life flickered into one of the men's eyes, the one who Dan remembered had glanced at him earlier through the tears, as though a white man turning up could somehow help save the day. Though the other sat rocking back and forth, eyes firmly affixed to the desk, unseeing, unseeing apart from envisioning the end of the barrel of a bloody gun no doubt. He knew that in Thailand murder was often a capital offence, death by firing squad. It wasn't just that they obviously hadn't washed, they stank of fear, and in the silence even the hope in the first man's eyes died, as Dan guessed they knew they were being paraded like animals before slaughter. And he shook, face flushing, wondering what dirty deal someone had done to get these two wretches to take the rap. How many sheaves of filthy notes had passed through Peeklong's sweat-soaked hands?

“So, tourist, you want to ask them anything before they're shipped to the Monkey House in Bangkok?”

He shook his head, and it was still shaking as he slammed the door of the police station behind him, a crack reverberating through the air as it sent a pane of glass shattering all over the floor.

“Sealife Centre? I was expecting this to be an aquarium, like, you know, the one in Brighton,” said Dan, whole body clenching as he looked around at the tanks lining the walls of the bar, tanks full of young men, with nothing but Speedos on.

“Sit yourself down, love. This is an aquarium, Thai style. But beware, there’s lots of sharks. Millions of ‘em. I should know,” said Monroe with a smile, revealing those tombstone teeth.

“Look, why the bloody hell am I here?”

“You’ve seen all those other journos moisturised to within an inch of their lives, jollyng it up like they’re on luxury friggng holidays, reporting the story as if it’s an open and shut case. Does my ‘ead in. Those poor lads, the fishermen. I saw their mums on the local TV channel earlier. Wailing they were, just wailing.”

“Yeah,” he said, flush rising to his cheeks, chest tight, breaths laboured, grabbing for the drink just plonked down, shakily lighting a fag.

“This place making you feel uncomfortable, dear? Come on, you’re not foolin’ anyone. Dolly knows. But look, I saw from your face that time in Coco Bananas, said to myself here’s an earnest little reporter...”

“Monroe, I don’t wanna be patronised. I don’t have time.”

“Patience. We’re getting there. Look, I couldn’t tell you this in Coco Bananas, the walls have ears, if you know what I mean,” he said, leaning in closer, putting a gnarled hand on Dan’s knee. “It obviously weren’t the fishermen, poor little loves. Someone with money, I would’ve thought, a big time

Charlie. We're not looking at small fry here, 'scuse the pun."

"Everyone says the same thing, that it must be someone connected. If you know who it is, just fucking spill it. Why we going round the houses," he said, batting the hand away, banging his drink down.

"Keep your 'air on, love. But that's what I saw in you. The anger. Be careful with that, especially 'ere. The Thais say, 'keep a cool heart', so channel it. Listen, if I did know who it was, I wouldn't tell ya because I like me sundowners too much."

"This is just unsubstantiated rumours," he said, turning away as a lad swam to the front of the nearest tank, eyes bug-ging out at him.

"It's educated guesswork. I've been here long enough to know. Plus, Bill was gay. So, the whole thing about them snogging just before the attack was a smokescreen. Finally, remember CCTV's your friend, provided the tapes still exist."

"Why you telling me all this?"

"Cos no one else gives a flying fuck, yet four lives, young lives, have been ruined. Two deaths are about to become four because some bastard can afford to buy his freedom. Don't get me wrong, I live here, but I don't have to agree with the way everything's done. The place is sick, yet I eat up all the temptations on offer like the next man. What does that make me? I saw in your eyes that first time, you care, that's different."

"Wish you knew the half of it but yeah, call it my penance," he said, abruptly getting up, heading straight for the door.

Hitting the street, he gulped down the air gratefully, but no sooner had he steadied himself someone bumped into him, hard, sending him spinning around.

"What the..."

He felt one hand lock onto to his right arm from behind, another his left, stilling him and craning his neck one way, then the other he was seeing double, looking into that skull-

like image he'd seen on the motorbike, those black vacant hollows where eyes should've been, assailants like twin messengers from hell. They dragged him silently to what he saw was a waiting truck, a crowd of people on the pavement bustling by like this was normal, his bellowing swallowed up by the booming music from the myriad bars. Dan knew he was dead meat if he was successfully deposited in the vehicle, but he couldn't resist their strength. The doors slammed shut with a clunk, air conditioning so icy it took his breath away, a looming figure either side of him on the bench seat in the dark, both terrifyingly mute.

Chapter 6

“Where the fuck are we going?” he heard himself say, strange, disembodied voice like it wasn’t really him but managing to spit out the words through lips that were almost glued together with fear, tongue lolling dry and sandpapery in his mouth.

But the silence continued, as if his panicked cry hadn’t even registered, one of his captors putting the truck into drive, the other turning on the CD player, dance music booming from the speakers, like this was an extension of the beach parties going on right now, like Dan was back on the terrace of Coco Bananas. But he knew this wasn’t any party, heart thundering along with the beat as he looked one side then the other, but it didn’t offer any clues.

The men in skull-like masks – he assumed they were men – simply stared forward out the windscreen, though like them the view provided no hints. An awful blackness unfolding, the town having flashed by, streets unlit, that blackness he’d witnessed on the first night on the island, at the death site, in the jungle when it had just seemed to engulf him. And despite the rutted road, they were picking up speed, his head bouncing uncomfortably against the ceiling of the cab as the music continued to pound. He imagined those swaying palms, the deserted sands, the inky black sea – that sea that had swallowed up both Bill and Corrine then spat them out. The Baltic air con no comfort as his body shivered, yet the sweat coursed from his brow, further blurring his shook-up vision.

He was waiting for them to say something, anything. Through his mixed-up head, thoughts collided in his brain like the wavering, seemingly unending train of headlights coming in the opposite direction, indicating they were

heading away from civilisation and he wondered whether he'd been set up. Had Monroe lured him to the so-called Sealife Centre just so he could be snatched outside? Caught like a fish on a bloody hook, 'scuse the pun.

Why hadn't he just swallowed Peeklong's version of the truth like the rest of the press pack. He could've already filed his story to Liffa for tomorrow's splash, two deck headline, name up in lights so to speak, nothing not to like about any of that. Dan could've been back on a plane to Som and Max. Could've, would've, should've. But then that was the point. The not wanting to go back had now become all-encompassing given Lerm's intervention. He hated him, but he hated himself above that because, more than anything, he despised the marriage as it meant he was a coward, Dan thought, chomping into a destroyed thumbnail.

The truck slewed to a halt, music coming to an abrupt end, silence screaming in his ears, a silence that seemed to say more than the thugs either side of him ever could, their meaty hands digging into his skinny frame. Peering out of the wind-screen he could make out that they were edged up to a dock, the white hulls of speedboats sticking out in the gloom, bouncing up and down on a gentle swell. As they threw open the doors, dragged him out, all fight gone, like air having been let out of a pathetic party balloon, the fishy port smell caused him to wrinkle his nose, the reek of fuel from the boats making him lightheaded and as he looked out to the inky horizon a whole new horror was unfolding before him. Nobody would be able to hear him out there. Shaking, he imagined his bloated body washed ashore, another pissed tourist who'd died of misadventure, probably warranting just a line or two in the Daily.

He was bundled into one of the boats, which had looked sleek on the outside but glancing around the open-air deck, scanning it hastily for what could be coming next, it was tired, dirty, Dan's feet planted in an oily sludge with a couple of discarded life vests floating in it. What was he thinking?

He wouldn't be bloody needing one of those anyway, shoulders slumping. One of his captors suddenly produced some handcuffs, roughly clicking one part onto his wrist and another to the railing running around the vessel, like this was all rehearsed, a common outing. The other man was busy pulling the chord to start the engines at the back, which after several spluttering attempts fired, causing him to bite down savagely to control his jittery jaw.

They lurched forward, the breeze ruffling his hair, setting his teeth chattering, prow rising with the speed, and as he wrested his head from side to side there was only an endless darkness unfurling as the boat raced out to sea. Weirdly, Som came to mind, a strange distraction technique, thinking she'd be somehow relieved that he was MIA. Yeah, she could overlay that with her own narrative, that he'd been involved in some kind of accident, he hadn't purposely left her and their son. And he thought of Lerm, that last night they'd had, but how could something that felt so good be so wrong, cause so much self-hate? Looking out again into the dark, as if a vacuum swallowing him whole, cold spray from the water slapped his face as they were well out of the sanctuary offered by the island, slicing through the open sea.

"Look," said Skull No 1 in a muffled voice, nudging an elbow hard into his ribs, pointing at a phone he'd removed from his pocket.

Scrolling through with gloved hands, were photos, images that shone out in the endless murk, Dan frantically computing what he was seeing, pulling so hard at his cuffed hand it was ripping into his flesh, drawing blood, feet slip-sliding around in the oil. He tried turning away, but the fucker grabbed the back of his neck, pushed his face towards the screen. There was photo after photo of Bill and Corrine, their alabaster skin lit up by the flash, caught in a magnesium glare, glassy eyes, rictus grins as if unable to escape the probing lens but it was the blood, the way it'd blackened in the cracked forehead of the boy, how it matted the girl's once lustrous hair. This was

taken just after the murders, a chill going through his body that these two had been there, were responsible and closing his eyes, unable to blink it away, body rocking with the boat, with the whole night, he vomited, couldn't stop.

He listened as the engine slowed and then stopped, sick laughter bubbling up around him, filling the void. The man who'd been sitting next to him, scrolling through the images had his head thrown back, shaking with mirth, the other just looking on from his station at the wheelhouse, Dan seeing his intimidating bulk as if for the first time twisted towards him. Both ghouls were clad in black boiler suits as though this was some dingy form of manual work, realising with a shudder it probably was, eyeing both pairs of hands, like bunches of bananas, murderous hands. Those bad spirits Peeklong had mentioned let loose again.

"You're going for a little dip," said Skull No 2 in a metallic, otherworldly voice, like he was disguising something, dancing up and down on the deck with the rolling waves as if he was enjoying himself.

He was desperate to accuse them of the murders, give some smart arsed reply but his mouth felt welded shut with the puke, the fear and looking out at the sea, the yellowy white phosphorous of the spume sent another chill through him, waves rearing up into the hull with crash after crash after crash. That's where he was going.

One of the men unfastened his wrist, adrenaline coursing through his body, and, sensing a chance, he flew at him, knocking his captor off the bench. But then darkness, a rushing in his ears, cold enveloping Dan's body, underwater he clawed at the sea, coughing and spluttering on finally breaking the surface, the man he'd knocked over looming menacingly over the deck, big arms folded contentedly, like job done, hull an unscalable white wall. He could see the man shaking, but it was with that familiar laughter, the awful sound of his humiliation carried on the breeze as he desperately batted at the water to stay afloat. Waves unending,

boiling around him as he attempted to remain near the boat, his captors, the sick irony of the situation, yet it was the only piece of solidity on a churning horizon.

Sound erupted around him, engine exploding into life again, heart hammering along with it, expecting to see the white boat become just a dot as a prelude to it being eaten by the darkness, before he sank below the waves. He screamed at the top of his lungs, unhinged gibberish, brain almost unable to decipher what was happening, shutting down, though knowing they couldn't hear him, final words being blown away on the incessant breeze. But then a line landed by his nose with a splash, and following it back to the boat, he saw one of the men at the stern pointing at it. Dan grabbed at the handles on the end, a water ski cable but no skis, fish riding a bloody bicycle coming to mind. Grabbing at the life-line he immediately felt the burning, churning, the straining as he cannonballed along over the surface until gravity dragged him into the terrifying blackness, water cascading down his throat, spewing it out dementedly each time he bobbed up.

A screaming sound from above caused him to wrench his head upwards, a passenger plane streaking through the sky, lights as if an apparition, realising in his muddled head it was the evening flight from Samui, that they'd gone so far from Coconut Island. Dan's teeth chattered uncontrollably as the cold bit into him and the thought flashed through his head as he was whipped about one way, then the other of those passengers above in their comfortable seats planning a night out in Bangkok, maybe an empty space that could've been his. And the number his body became, the more his brain sped up, a kaleidoscope of images unfurling in his head, life passing by as he was hammered up and down by the swell, the constant movement.

His arms ached with the strain, body shuddering with the chill, but still he clung on, still the perpetual motion. But it was becoming harder and harder to recover his breath after

each dunking, taking all his energy to cough the water out of his lungs. The body shaking effort was accompanied by a hacking, panicked sound, realising it was emanating from within, frightening, animalistic, along with the still endless drone of the engine, like some kind of slow torture that could only be dreamed up by evil men. And he finally let go, wind-milling pathetically at the water with exhausted arms just to keep afloat, though the fight was gone, the boat an ever-diminishing dot, great white hope over the horizon.

Chapter 7

The lights came into view, though blurred, Dan almost seeing double as if he was on another of his benders, one such incident having led him to this damn country in the first place, but those myriad pinpricks of neon looked just several hundred metres away and he continued swimming. It was taking all his effort just to keep his head above the incessant churn of the waves, feeling that effort from the end of his toes to the tips of fingers that were burning with the cold. He knew if he went under, witnessed that sickening blackness once again, it would drag him down into the depths where the sun never penetrated. Breaths were bursting from his lungs as he thrashed his arms and despite the water all around, his mouth was completely parched, lips cracked, bleeding, the overwhelmingly salty, seaweed taste of the ocean at the back of his throat, like it was becoming him but he could see the sandy crescent of the shoreline now illuminated almost poetically in the moonlight.

Stopping the thrashing, he dared to dangle his legs only to kick the sandy bottom, and he began convulsing, doubling up in laughter. Dan had been swimming for his life and suddenly realised he could actually sodding stand up. He thought back to the fuckers on the boat as he waded to the shore, the expressionless, soundless skulls, smiling despite the aches wracking his body, though his head was pounding with the events of the night, the grotesque images, the awful unanswered questions, as he hauled himself from the sea. Dan wondered if they'd expected him to survive, though he knew he'd feel forever a marked man, life reduced to one of continuous torment, always having to look over his shoulder.

The fact that he was sodden, trembling from the cold, head

spinning from those relentless waves wasn't enough to hide the fact that, like some awful fate, he'd landed back on Death Beach. His body quivered as the wind rustled the trees of the darkened jungle beyond. Odd to think throngs of backpackers were partying just round the headland, but here death's aura pervaded, and it was so strong it was like he could taste it. He didn't understand why he'd been spared but overtaking the fear was an anger that throbbed through him, muscles tensing, breaths quickening as Dan looked at the indentations in the sand where the arc lights had been set up, the slickly choreographed press conference with the Thai fishermen wheeled out looking like another set of victims and he shook his head, remembering his pledge to Bill and Corrine.

"I'm going to get whoever did this," he said, patting his pocket, coming across the waterlogged pack of cigarettes, Dan so needing a fag as next he pulled out the knackered phone, useless accoutrements of what felt like his former life, everything different, the before and after as his knees buckled and he clawed at the wet sand, head bowed and sobbing.

There was the then, and this was the now, he thought as through the fog he got unsteadily to his feet, recalled the way back to town, knowing his life in Bangkok had to wait, something he continued to run away from but he had more important things on his mind for a change, it wasn't all about him. He even had an excuse not to call Som, a sick smile stretched across his face, but then he remembered with a jolt he wouldn't be able to read Lerm's increasingly insistent texts either. Dan went straight back for the phone, frantically pulling it apart with shaking hands, breaths only stilling when he located the sim card, puffing out his cheeks, the lad would still be able to contact him as soon as he got a new mobile. All those terrible possibilities flowered in his mind, his heart flutter with them.

The hum from the beach bars was becoming louder, the buzz of chatter like so many excitable birds, but he noticed

the way they glanced at him, the travellers so earnestly broadening their horizons as they slurped out of buckets. They were looking at him like they were worried, but it wasn't a concerned worried as if he was some psycho, it was more that they cared he didn't fit in, and he felt the hate. It was obvious, since a guy walking down the beach fully clothed, yet soaking wet, sporting a wild kind of stare should have prompted someone to ask whether he was okay but no one did, conversations simply restarting as he waved forlornly at them, recognising the tosser from the BBC, the one with the public school accent and the disdainful glance. Mr BBC didn't respond either but looked away, embarrassed, going back to his expensive cocktail like earlier hadn't happened and it was all some jaunt.

He passed Coco Bananas, the place packed, imagining Monroe stationed at his usual perch, still sitting on that knowledge, having threatened to tell him everything but revealing nothing. Presiding over it all Von Eil, lording it in that comfortable office behind two-way glass, no doubt dollars in his eyes as he watched the transactions mount but at the same time pervy over the clientele, easily able to afford the tastiest treats on offer. Dan had heard money could "buy anything" in Thailand and the Yank epitomised that ethos, he thought as he gobbled into the sand.

The police station door still had the pane of glass missing, and he couldn't help but laugh as he roughly pushed it open. Something almost imperceptible passed across Peeklong's face, something he couldn't quite grasp, but it was there like a cloud momentarily blocking the sun. As Dan blinked, the police-general's sickly grin returned, TV on the wall behind him showing a scene of carnage in Bangkok, troops laying waste to what looked like one of the protest camps, flashes coming from their rifles, sound muted but he winced imagining the screams as he dripped all over the lino like some sea creature. There was another officer standing behind Peeklong, one he recognised from the press conference, but

he was dismissed to the next room with a flick of the guvnor's wrist – only one man in charge here.

“Went for a swim, did we, tourist?” he said, laughter rumbling out of him,

“I was kidnapped, nearly drowned. What you going to do about it?”

“Do? Do? These seas are not like yours. In Thailand, if you swim with sharks, you get eaten. Look at them!” he shouted, turning round and jabbing a finger at the TV.

“They're protesting for democracy.”

“Democracy? Don't make me laugh, tourist. They hate the king, our king, and they will be rooted out, every last one. Rooted out and dealt with...”

“I was kidnapped, didn't you hear me? What you going to do about that?” he said, standing directly over the policeman now, dripping all over his desk.

“Go back to where you came from, Englishman. Or you'll end up like them,” he said, pointing at the TV again, flash of silver as he pulled the gun from its holster, looked down the barrel at Dan with that beady eye.

“What are you going to do with those fishermen? You know they didn't do it.”

“*Mai phut* [shut up]! We are civilised in this country. We still have capital punishment. They'll be tried and then face a firing squad. Bang! Bang!” he said, waving the barrel up and down.

Cruel laughter stung Dan's ears as he stumbled out of the police station, an imaginary clock ticking in his head getting louder and louder, knowing if he didn't find the truth then there'd be two other bloody victims, another pair of families attending the untimely funerals of their offspring. He couldn't let that happen, thoughts going back to that night, London, the drunken fumbling with the ignition, the swerving down the road, a sickening crunch, the slewing to a halt, half grasping in his stupor that he'd hit something, hoping it was a cat but then through bleary eyes seeing the crumpled bicycle, girl

just lying there with legs at an impossible angle, long blonde hair stained crimson...

He was shivering, still soaking wet as he made his way unsteadily back to the bungalow, patting at the useless phone in his pocket, knowing he needed to speak to work, Som, Lerm. Everyone he passed seemed to be heading for another night in paradise, smirks on their faces, skin glowing from a day at the sun-kissed beach, ready to leave all responsibilities behind just like Bill and Corrine and they eyed him with suspicion, like the impostor he was. Dan scrunched up his face, turned away from their probing eyes, all too aware he didn't belong, that he could never belong but knowing he needed to do this one thing as some kind of karmic payback.

Barging into a 7-Eleven, the stupid, mind-numbing beep as he entered making him jump, the icy cold air con as though freezing the damp clothes to his body, his eyes lasered onto what he needed, swiping at the bottle of Thai whisky, slipping it in the waistband of his shorts, bolting for the door, wallet at the bottom of the ocean, along with his hope. Yet another fuck-up, a litany of them following him around, but as he neurotically glanced backwards, exiting the shop, he laughed out loud. He'd got away with it, another transgression, though the debit column was growing, realising he could never attest for what he'd done, but, *and it was a big but*, he had to bloody try, he couldn't keep running away. He unscrewed the cap, slung it into the scrub at the side of the road with the other rubbish, necked furiously at the bottle, hearing the giggles of the loved up, hippy dippy couple who'd just walked past bubble up behind him.

Approaching the resort, whisky buzz evening out what had gone earlier, taking the edge off, he knew he needed the sanctuary of sleep, the only time he was away from his thoughts, that washing machine mind of his. Everything was still tinged

by the blackness of what happened earlier, stress headache as though it was threatening to split his skull in two, but he wasn't running away anymore as he continued putting one step in front of the other, as tonight he'd glimpsed the other side yet somehow that'd taken away some of the fear. Then he froze, who was he trying to bloody kid, heart battering in his chest, sweat instantly coating his hands, a tingle all over, someone was silhouetted on the porch of his bungalow and Dan could tell by the way the body was poised, neck wrenched round, that they'd seen him.

"Dan?" she said, peering through the gloom, like she didn't even recognise him, wasn't actually sure.

"Som," he said, lurching towards her, the drink having dulled his reflexes, stumbling up the stairs, preparing to hug her, his wife, the mother of his child, be enveloped in hope all over again.

"Don't you touch me."

She ducked away, looking accusingly at him, then throwing her hands up as if she had all the questions in the world but didn't actually want to know, tears springing to those eyes.

"Som, please..."

"No please. I called work and they told me where you were. Don't worry about Max, he's with Mum. I came to tell you it's over. Me and you. You and Max. Finished. What the hell! You have a boyfriend? And he called me up to tell me you weren't brave enough to let your own wife know."

"He's not a boyfriend."

"Don't you think I see the way you look at men? You undress them with your eyes. Anyway, Dan, he gave me dates, times. They all check out. We haven't had sex for months, and you're spending all this time with someone barely out of college."

"Listen, Som, it's nothing, Lerm was just a mistake..."

"Lerm this, Lerm that. That's all I've been thinking about. Max and I were at home forever waiting, and you were fuck-ing some lad," she said, standing up, eyes blazing.

“I came here to Thailand for you. It was about you and Max.”

“Dan,” she said, grabbing him by the arm, nails digging into his skin, face right in his. “You didn’t come for me. You got behind the wheel drunk and killed that girl, that eighteen-year-old girl, poor Suzie. All because you couldn’t stop with the damn bottle, weren’t brave enough. Then we had to run away to Thailand. You know what? I’m not running anymore; I don’t need to. Murderer.”

“I’m not a murderer, Som. I’m trying to make it right...”

“You murdered us!” she said, spittle flying into his face as she stomped off the porch.

Ridiculously, he felt a stirring of want at the anger that had flared in her face, finally seeing some passion, but then a pain in his stomach knifed through him, the knowing he’d never see her again. And even if they did salvage some kind of nominal relationship for Max’s sake, he knew he’d never hold her again, would never be bathed in her lovely smile, in that hope. Dan knew she was right. He had *murdered* them. The tears blinded his eyes as he watched Som disappear off into the treeline, merge with the darkness of the jungle, the bad spirits raging around tonight, and he thought of that tattoo on Lerm’s neck, half angel, half devil.

He’d tried sleeping but the pathetically thin wooden walls of his bungalow shook with the music of the never-ending party. Putting the pillow over his head was no use because even if you could deaden the sound slightly, the beat thundered through his body, but he was constantly wired anyway, the speedboat, the skulls, Peeklong, Som, the whole damn night. And his heart tripped along to the techno sound, almost like those that ran the island didn’t want anyone to sleep because it meant they weren’t earning. Dan slugged down the last drop of whisky, not even feeling drunk, just a heaviness as he

rose unsteadily from the bed, clothes almost dry in the soupy heat but discoloured by his prolonged dunking, a tide mark defacing his shirt like he'd almost become part of the sea because that'd surely been the plan. And stepping out the bungalow it was running through his head on a loop, the way he'd been bundled off the street into the 4x4, like it was choreographed, as if they knew exactly where he'd be and there was someone he had to speak to.

It was the usual scene, the veranda rammed, glowing backpackers slurping from buckets, lolling back on beanbags, not even attempting conversation, though what was the point of chat when you could just get high, zone out given the encyclopaedic amount of illicit substances on offer, look up at the stars. It was all hippy chic, but he shivered as he looked at the drug fucked youngsters, their glassy, almost unseeing eyes giving the place that underlying menace he'd felt on first arriving on the island. The barman had clocked him, the heavy from before, barman cum bouncer more like, and he waved over, but it was met by a snarl. Undeterred, Dan made his way to the counter, ordered a beer, the pumped-up Michelin Man wordlessly plonking the bottle on the chrome top, though he thought he could detect some surprise in his expression, in the way his eyebrow cocked, like he wasn't expected to still be around. Like it was common knowledge Dan Young had been dealt with, but you know what, he thought, sinking his beer, pumping a fist, young Dan was still going strong and wasn't about to run away. No, not this time, he was staying right here.

He had learnt a thing or two since he'd been at the Daily and that was to brazen it out. Showing up where you weren't meant to be could get a person in trouble, but if you had the balls to stay put, there was a not a lot anybody could do. Anyway, he'd survived the dunking, the going down into the black depths, what else was there?

“Looking for someone, Limey?”

He felt the firm grip on his shoulder, heard the American

twang in his ears, could smell the cigar smoke, sweat coating his palms with anticipation for as he turned around those blue eyes burned into his. "I am as a matter of fact."

"As a matter of fact, I decide who's welcome at my club but since you've been on a bumpy little ride, you're probably in need of a stiff drink. A stiff something. But man, look at the state of you, creature from the blue friggin' lagoon."

"How the hell you know about that?" he said, grasping at a tailored sleeve.

"Hey skid row take your hands off my Savile Row. Let's just say word gets around, a certain police-general likes to keep me informed of the comings and goings on the island and you were nearly a goner by the sounds of it. But after your near death experience, be my guest, fill your boots. Fill your freakin' boots. Get it?"

"You're such a comedian, asshole."

"You may think you've got nine lives, but remember, your damn countrymen Billy Boy and Corrine weren't so lucky. You need peepers in the back of that head of yours, dude," said the Yank, giving him a not so gentle shove, striding off in a cloud of smoke from the perennial Cuban.

The barman, who'd been looking over the whole time, had gone back to spearing limes, like he'd been warned off. For now. He breathed out but was clenching and unclenching his fists, so unsettled by the reference to Bill and Corrine as he walked into the club out back, again the air-conditioned coolness causing him to shake, though the piano was soothing after the hub-bub of the bar, if anything could be soothing right now. And he spotted him straight away, plonked in what he guessed was his usual spot, comfy sofa right next to the pianist, sitting solo as ever, unlike the other grotesquely mismatched couples, so many beauty and the beasts like before, glazed expressions on many of the Thai faces.

"I bet you didn't expect to see me," he said, sitting opposite Monroe, managing a weak smile, glad of the gloom hiding his ruined appearance.

“My love, you’re always popping up like a bad penny, why would I be surprised?”

“You’ve no idea what bloody happened to me tonight?”

“To be honest, you looked so unnerved by the Sealife Centre, I thought you’d gone to drown your sorrows...”

“Drown my sorrows, drown my bloody sorrows! So you do know,” he said, grabbing the old man round the collar.

“Babes, for God’s sake. No one tells me anything, all above my pay grade. I’m just an old fart,” he said, getting up, brushing him off with surprising strength like he was some minor irritant. “But, sonny, grow some balls. I see you moping around, all conflicted. Someone told me you ‘ave a wife. At some point, you got to be yourself. Embrace it. Don’t think Dolly doesn’t know, I saw the way you looked at those lads at Sealife.”

“It’s not about that. I need to know what happened here, to me, to Bill and Corrine. You know those fishermen, those young lads are gonna die. And what about the Yank? What the hell floats his boat? He was talking about Bill and Corrine like it’s all a joke...”

“Bit of advice from your favourite aunt: don’t get involved with the Unquiet American. You’ll live to regret it. Well, you may not. Live, that is.”

“But why’s he untouchable? Like he’s above bloody scrutiny. Seems everyone is here,” he said, banging down his bottle, noticing Von Eil hovering in the background, looking over at them, the Yank’s smile unable to disguise a quizzical expression and it was like he’d heard it all even though he was out of earshot.

“You can’t right every wrong. Pick your bleedin’ battles. But Dan, listen to me, I can’t tell you who killed those two lovelies, those angels, because I don’t know. What I do know, you need access to the CCTV. The sergeant’s a good man; he was the copper originally stationed on the island till they flew in Billy Big Bollocks Peeklong. You need to speak to him. Tell him a little bird sent you.”

Chapter 8

He could still taste the Thai whisky on his cracked lips and as though seared into the back of his throat. The rancid street-side coffee couldn't wash away the tang nor blot out what had occurred last night. Dan shielded his eyes against the brutal tropical sun, sweat dripping from him even though it was early morning, the alarm having been like a pneumatic drill but he knew he needed an early start, figured the police-general liked to catch up on sleep after his night-time rounds. The town was eerily quiet, only the street dogs eyeing him lazily as he shambled by, body gripped with pain after having swum for his life, jittery looks over each shoulder to make sure he wasn't being eyed, followed but he wasn't about to give up, no, he was going deeper.

In the dark of night-time the shadows suited Coconut Island, like it hid the naked facts but the glare of daylight revealed the Third World and he coughed as the incessant dust from the dirt track of a road attacked the back of his throat, nose filled with the stench of the open sewers. The corrugated iron roofed lean-to bars were baking in the heat, but at least they were empty, though he imagined later the red-faced *farang* picked out in the neon glow dripped all over their lithe but flinching companions.

He knocked on the door of the police station, still missing the glass panel and so flimsy it opened at his touch. Snoring assailed his ears and sitting at the reception desk, head bobbing gently back and forth, deep in the land of nod was presumably the sergeant, vaguely recognising him from the pantomime of a press conference on the beach. Maybe this was the nightshift, he thought, or did the guy bloody live here? Dan knew most policemen in the kingdom earned an

absolute pittance unless you rose to the level of chief extortioner, like Don Peeklong, hence the long hours for many, the broken marriages, the drink habit.

“Can I help you?” said the copper, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, though managing an embarrassed smirk.

“I’d like to see the CCTV.”

“CCTV?” he said, sitting bolt upright, smile wiped from his face.

“I’m a journalist, sergeant, with the Bangkok Daily, and I don’t believe those fishermen had anything to do with Bill and Corrine dying, do you?”

“Sorry, but I can’t tell you anything, it’s no longer my case...”

“Listen,” said Dan, slapping the desk, the sergeant jolting back in his chair. “I know they didn’t do it, you know they didn’t do it. Fuck Peeklong. If you had any balls, you’d stop two more innocent people dying, two more families being ruined.”

“But I’m not in charge anymore. The CCTV’s operated out of Coco Bananas, they put it in for security. That’s all I know.”

“So Von Eil could help crack this case wide open, yet no one thought to ask? What do you know?” he said, leaning on the desk, eyes level with the sergeant’s, forcing him to turn away but Dan clawed his head back around to face him.

“Von Eil? The American? That’s the problem with you *farang*, you think you know everything about this place, that you own it, us. Von Eil’s nothing, just an acceptable face. You don’t know what you’re dealing with.”

“Then tell me. What do you bloody know?” he said, banging the desk with his fist.

“I don’t. Look, I’m just a family man...”

“Families are what we’re trying to save. Listen to me, I never reveal my sources, but you don’t need to say anything, just shake your head if you don’t believe those fishermen were responsible.”

He looked on as the sergeant's noggin shook, the policeman's eyes downcast studying the desk, then a draught of air, door slamming shut behind him.

"Ah, tourist, just the man I was looking for. What the hell's happening? It looks like a seance, you're both concentrating so hard. Trying to raise the dead?"

Feeling the hot breath on his neck, the familiar voice in his ears, he glanced round, the police-general a pace or two behind. Peeklong began barking something at his colleague in Thai, complexion going from light tan to post-box red, the sergeant scooting from the office without even saying goodbye, looking back.

"What happened there?"

"He's had a long shift, and he's probably not thinking straight. Nights can play tricks on the mind. You should know, Mr Englishman, you never seem to sleep. Still, I hope you're well rested, we're going on a little trip," he said, putting a beefy arm around Dan's shoulders, propelling him out of the station.

"What trip?"

"So, so many questions. Think you have a saying, curiosity killed the cat. I've also been doing my own research, and I hear someone doesn't have a work permit, tut, tut. Let's do a deal: you stop with the questions and just listen for once, and I'll ignore certain indiscretions."

His stomach spasmed, another gut punch because if he knew about the no work permit, then he also knew why he'd run, and Dan was resigned at the hand now in the small of his back guiding him to the dusty truck. His heart was skipping the light fantastic all over again, legs leaden, though he slid into the passenger seat as instructed. What other bloody choice did he have? Peeklong had him.

He shook his head as he peered out of the grimy wind-screen, looking at the oily port again, speedboats bobbing up and down, their once white paintwork having gone a mildewed murk, indicating like pretty much everything on the

island they'd seen better days. Kind of a metaphor for the country itself, military government doing what all juntas did best. Behind bright smiles and polished medals, the generals were pocketing the country's riches with their grubby fingers. He got the whiff of that decay when Peeklong opened the passenger door, rotting fish, petrol fumes, even a yeasty haze of booze emanating from the huddle of fishermen obviously having flogged their night-time catch and now pissing away the proceeds, probably trying to forget about their poor mates who'd been banged up, wondering if they were next.

The police-general told him to wait by the vehicle and was already in the faces of a couple of the older men, face scrunched up intimidatingly, voice raised, Dan sensing he was negotiating something and wasn't about to take no for an answer. Peeklong impatiently waved him over, and he obediently followed the three of them to one of the boats. He could've just done a runner, but something had stopped him, maybe what Som said, how he was always running, but it was time to face things, if not for himself, then for Bill and Corrine. The copper had him by the balls, anyway.

"Where we going?" he said, as Peeklong gestured for him to get in the boat, two fishermen already aboard ladling out the greyish looking water the deck was swimming in with two ice cream tubs.

"For a little ride. Maybe you can write about it in your newspaper. I'm no sailor, so I've hired our two captains for the day. These men owe me."

"Owe you?" he said, climbing into the boat, one of the men wiping a bench free of oil and grease so he could sit.

"They know it could be them in the Monkey House."

Peeklong's laugh punctured the morning air as he hauled his pig-like frame into the boat, fishermen pointedly looking the other way, like there was no way they were going to help this fucker and Dan deciphered what he'd just said as he slammed a fist into the bench. *It could be them*, so in other words it was all a setup. Because if it could be them, it could

be anybody. What did evidence, guilt, have to do with it?

With much cajoling from the pair, the engines spluttered into life, and he looked at them as the boat finally took off. Their faces were burnt almost black from the sun, deep creases around their eyes with age, clothes an indiscernible grey hanging from them like rags but they both did as they were told, like adhering to some unwritten rule, one of them tending to the engines aft, the other steering, neither deigning to look at their two passengers on a boat the police-general had apparently commandeered just because he could.

He looked back at the island, receding in the spume, verdant green of the jungle, powdery white of the crescent-shaped shores framed by the clear blue of the sea and it was obvious why people, youngsters, travelled thousands of miles but he shook his head knowing that beauty was all a lie, just skin deep. Dan remembered Lerm telling him it had once been a prison island, and the shivers rode up his arms as though that desperate aura blighted the place, thinking back to the images he'd been shown on the phone last night, Bill's lips milky white, translucent almost after having become waterlogged in the surf, while Corrine's ghostly pallor clashed with teeth blackened the colour of ashes after a bonfire.

"Welcome to Samui. Everything okay, tourist?" said Peeklong, the fishermen having landed the boat on Coconut Island's much bigger neighbour.

He merely nodded, though nothing was okay as he limply allowed the copper to transfer him to another pickup with a driver. Dan thought again of Som, wondered if he'd ever see her again, if she even bloody cared. Then there was Lerm, the lad probably having given up on him due to the fact he was no longer a fully paid-up member of society, that is, contactable by phone. And he knew he needed to speak to Liffio, if he even still had a job, that story, due, like, yesterday.

They pulled up outside a large police station, a much more impressive structure than the one on Coconut Island, spanning several storeys and boasting proper signage that didn't

blow around in the wind like it was advertising some ramshackle pub. Peeklong ushered him inside as several minions saluted the police-general then proceeded to get out of his way like he was trouble. Dan followed through a labyrinth of dimly lit corridors, bars up at the windows, a place that seemed to hint at incarceration, rather than detection. The cop threw open a door and, looking tiny and infantile behind a large desk were what he recognised as the prime suspects, the two fisherman and an officious looking man to their right biting his nails.

“Pull up a chair,” said Peeklong with a sigh.

He sat as instructed, but the men were looking at the desk. Dan grabbed the packet of Falling Rain from his pocket, all he could afford, the cheap Thai cigarettes he knew they probably smoked – didn’t everyone smoke here – and offered them to the men. It worked, a peace offering as they both grabbed at the packet, their eyes finally meeting his. Discernible from a distance but close up it made him flinch, their faces bruised, misshapen, they’d obviously been manhandled, beaten, the words literally punched out of them.

“Ask anything you want. That’s why we have an interpreter. No expense spared. Let’s get this over with. You can get your story and crawl back to where you came from. They’re being held here on Samui before being flown to the Bangkok Monkey House. Do you think I want to be doing this, wasting my time with the likes of you, tourist. I want to be on the golf course, lingering at the nineteenth hole. I don’t need the stress!” said Peeklong, swatting away the smoke.

The ticking of a clock filled the room, the only sound, as he looked at the two squat men and they peered at him, thinking back to those images at the beach, Bill and Corrine’s distorted faces, their crumpled bodies. The life had been crushed out of them, but they were Amazonian compared to these two uneducated bloody pigmies and he knew there was no way the narrative they were all being fed was true. Dan balled his hands into fists, trembling as he thought back to his induction,

that first day at the beach, followed by the horror at the temple, then the sham of a press conference, now this. Boiling up, he swiped at the sweat coating his forehead and, having already smoked his fag down to the filter, shakily lit another.

“You didn’t do it, did you? You didn’t kill Bill and Corrine. You couldn’t even fight your way out of a paper bag,” he said, looking directly at the two men, boring into what seemed like pleading eyes.

“Excuse me, what was the last part of your statement?” said the interpreter, dabbing at his face with a handkerchief.

“They couldn’t fight their way out of a paper bag. Look at ‘em. Did you see how big Bill was? Big strapping lad. Rugby player. What do you reckon? You’re an intelligent man, university educated I guess, but not so sure about our police-general here.”

“Well, I really wouldn’t know...”

“Enough!” shouted Peeklong, face glowing, slapping the desk. “Ask them if they did it, if they’re responsible for the killing of the two backpackers. Ask!”

“Can’t even use their bloody names, can you? This is a charade,” said Dan.

“Ask them. Now!”

The interpreter was even more fiercely dabbing at his face, babbling away in Thai at the two men beside him, both rocking back and forth as they finally spoke but it was mumbled, staccato, through snatched, panicked drags of cigarette – like time running out – as they shook their heads. Peeklong failed to take his eyes off the translator the entire time.

“They both agree they did it. They killed Bill and Corrine,” he said.

“But they were shaking their heads. I don’t care what language that’s still the universal indication of ‘we didn’t fucking do it’,” said Dan, looking at the pair as they shifted uncomfortably in their seats, one of them drumming a sad lament on the desk with his fidgety fingers, the other staring vacantly into space.

Peeklong shouted something behind him and almost instantaneously a pair of warders came into the claustrophobic little room, roughly handcuffed the pair whose faces were now a ghoulish white, lives as if flashing before them. The man who'd had tears in his eyes at the pantomime of a press conference made fleeting eye contact with Dan again, like it was a last chance but he was all too soon bundled away back into the shadows with his mate, chains rattling as they went as if they were in some mediaeval torture chamber. He imagined the cell they were held in, stifling, with no natural light, probably something they'd experience now until their final days and he knew the end would come soon enough because then they'd be silent, could no longer embarrass the authorities, the episode over, forgotten. But he couldn't forget, knowing the parents of Bill and Corrine wouldn't be appeased and as for the families of those two poor Thai wretches, Dan just couldn't imagine what they were going through as he uncoiled his tense body, paced up and down the tiny room that seemed to be closing in on them all.

"You heard them. They said they did it. Write that in your damn newspaper, tourist," said the police-general.

He stopped pacing, leant over the desk, grabbed Peeklong by his frayed lapels, the cop shifting around in his cheap uniform, medals looking plasticky, fake under the scrutiny of the lights, beady eyes static for once, concern flaring in that flacid face. "Those men probably say a prayer of forgiveness each time they kill a fish, yet you're willing to send them to their deaths. They're not guilty, and you know it. Who are you bloody protecting?"

The clock ticked on, filling the silence as he stared into the policeman's face for what felt like forever, the officer's breathing more and more ragged until he shoved him backwards, stomping out of the room, needing to get back to Coconut Island, even more desperate to uncover the truth. He didn't have long to save those two men, but the story was writing itself.

Staggering off the gangplank he doubled over, puke dribbling out of him, amazed there was anything left after that boat trip. The jetty was terra firma, but it still felt he was rolling on the waves, the boat from Samui that'd been mainly reserved for workers had been thrown around like a cork, yet they'd been packed in so there was barely a space between them, certainly not a lifejacket to be had, just lucky he'd been next to a rusting porthole. Just another veil lifted for Dan, a reminder that despite the Amazing Thailand tourist brochure schtick, he was in the Third World, life was cheap. He knew from the papers these boats often sank with all hands, yet after a bit of weeping and wailing, lip service from some chauffeur-driven government minister about improving safety, things just returned to normal. No one cared about the bloody workers, like the two fishermen, they were completely expendable.

He pushed at the flimsy police station door, which swung open, smirking at the still missing pane of glass.

"How can I help you, sir?" said a young man behind the desk, immaculately turned out as though he was a new recruit, eager to please, a smile plastered over his face.

"I'm looking for the sergeant."

"Sorry, there's no sergeant that works here."

"He was here this morning. First thing. I bloody spoke to him."

"Sorry, but you must be mistaken, sir."

"The sergeant's the resident copper on the island. Everyone knows him. Been here years."

"Can't help you. He may have been reassigned. I can ask my superior, who's on business in Koh Samui..."

"I know all about your superior," he said, shaking his head as he left the office, familiar tension gripping his shoulders.

He lifted his face to the torrential rain, the storm he'd been through on the boat had come inland, looking on as the shards of lightning split the sky, the boom of thunder setting his heart

thrashing in his chest, but Dan lapped at the raindrops like they were life giving. Surviving last night felt like fate, that he was spared for a reason, and he ducked into a phone shop knowing he had work to do.

Putting in his SIM card the new mobile began lighting up with messages, and he smiled to himself, knowing who from, glad he was still wanted at the same time as needing to bury that feeling so deep inside it physically hurt. He bit another chunk out of his thumbnail, what was left of it, knowing it wasn't long before he could grab a drink, top up, take the edge off but first he dialled, ringing tone as if in rhythm with the pounding in his temple, palms slippery with fear.

“Bangkok Daily.”

“Frank, it's Dan...”

“Young Dan, where in God's name do you think you've been? I send you off to paradise island on the Bangkok Daily's buggerin' dollar and you go Awol. The mainstream media are all over this story like a rash, yet we have boots on the ground and have piss all, mate, piss stinking all.”

“Frank, Frank, the two fishermen, they didn't do it. There's no way they did it. I met them today, they're dwarves, pigmies compared to Bill. They couldn't blow the skin off a bloody rice pudding,” he said, breathless, already writing the story in his head, page one splash.

“Away with the fairies, Dan my boy, I knew you were. His Majesty's cuntsabulary have charged these boys. Our job is to report the facts. The facts. This government doesn't wear suits, they're in buggerin' khaki uniforms. They can close newspapers down, arrest journalists with a click of the fingers. I want a story stating the facts on my desk by lunchtime.”

“The facts...” he said, but he realised he was talking to himself, the other end of the line dead and he shook his head, those images he'd been shown on the phone last night were real, that was the story and whoever had revealed those was a killer not those pair of pathetic fishermen.

Chapter 9

He looked up briefly from his newspaper, distracted at what he took to be the *farang* bar owner humming along to Cabaret. Could it get any more desperate, he thought, noticing Natasha's on the back wall picked out in the requisite gaudy neon, guzzling his morning beer, the only place in town serving, booze, at least. Talk about the last chance saloon, completely open to the dusty street and Dan cooking under the corrugated iron roof with the pitiful electric ceiling fans no defence against the tropical sun. The man winked over, but he didn't want to know, could do without the earache, returning to the Daily, though he hadn't really been taking it in before and suddenly did a double take at the banner headline on the front page: "General Chin slams bikini babes"

Below the header, of course, was a photo of said scantily clad "bikini babes" on some Thai beach, Liffó really having outdone himself this time. He drained the beer before reading on, like he needed courage as Corrine's awful image looped through his mind, shaking his head at the Thai prime minister's claim – "Westerners don't respect our customs... they prance around half naked, particularly the women." This had all come up apparently in relation to a question from a journalist about the backpacker killings. General Chin might as well have just said they were asking for it. If that was the bloody leader of the country's point of view, what chance was there of ever seeing justice?

Dan had once heard the Gracious Leader talk of trying to attract "quality" tourists to the kingdom, as though backpackers were somehow worthless. No wonder Liffó had dubbed the general Chinless Wonder, it was about right. Yet he and his cronies were in charge, and whatever they said was

gospel, as appearing in their mouthpiece the Bangkok Daily. He lit a cigarette, drew the smoke deep into his lungs until it hurt, finally huffing out a huge cloud of smoke, slinging the paper aside. So it was okay for the Little Ignorant Fucker from Oz to come up with slights for Brother Number One, yet his words were given front page billing, relegating the killing of anti-government protesters to a sidebar, a sideshow. He also wasn't interested in printing the truth about the Coconut Island Two, preferring to toe the party line. Where were the Aussie's balls? "We'll see about that," he said under his breath, opening his laptop, banging out the first words of a story that flowed and flowed.

"You're a busy boy. Like another drink? It's on the house, by the way. You look like you need one," said the bar owner.

"Not sure that's a compliment," he said, looking up from his screen, though he'd stopped typing, the story done, already emailed, "The truth about the Coconut Island Two" hopefully being read by Lifflo.

"No, it's not like that, I see all sorts in 'ere. I don't get the sense you're a wrong 'un."

"Ta. Just a Chang then, large, naturally. If you're buying."

The man placed down two big beers, icy bottles glistening, and sitting opposite he smiled as if it was meant to be reassuring, which Dan took as welcome in a place as iffy as Thailand, where nearly everyone seemed to have an angle. Taking a swig of his drink, he guessed the bloke was fortysomething, though the nervy tic under his eye, the shaky hands, the raggedy bar drag of greying singlet and oversize Bermuda shorts spoke of trauma, having given up and he felt his shoulders relax for the first time in days, like they were kindred spirits somehow.

"Dan. I work for the Bangkok Daily."

"So you're a hack? Was trying to work you out. Thought you might've been an English teacher. I'm the owner of this dump."

"English teacher? Bloody hell. Not that bad," he said,

managing a laugh as Cabaret morphed into I Will Survive, for the first time noticing glittery curtains framing a raised platform cum stage, finally getting it, mouth going dry.

“It’s a cabaret bar. Ladyboys. I fell for ‘er hook, line and sinker, Natasha. Realised too late I was swimming with sharks. Took everything I had apart from this hole. That’s Thailand, just remember what they say about all that glitters. Something about her perfect bum, tits, smile but you know none of it’s real. This making you feel uncomfortable?”

“I’m sorry...”

“Listen, you’re only uncomfortable if you feel threatened, but the one soddin’ saving grace is you can be yourself ‘ere. I don’t know your circumstances, if you have circumstances, but you look like you need telling. Silly me, I thought it was love. She even did my laundry at first, by hand, but she came with attachments.”

“Attachments?”

“Not what you think. The family, the sick buffalo, the even sicker dad. All euphemisms. She was a parasite. All the money she leeches from me went into her silk-lined pocket. When it stopped, it was a machete to the throat.”

“Bloody hell,” he said, but it was as if the bloke wasn’t seeing him, unreachable.

“It’s too late now. I don’t have any links back home. Couldn’t go back even if I wanted to. I’m too far gone.”

“What about this island? The backpacker killings?”

“That’s why you’re sniffing around. As I said, remember all that glitters. You live in Bangkok, and you thought that was bad, but it’s the law of the jungle down ‘ere. They say people in southern Thailand have a black heart. I’ve seen it. This whole place is run by mafia. I give a third of my takings to the old bill just so this gaffe’s not burnt to the ground.”

“What about Von Eil?”

“The Yank. He’s scum, bad news. Keep out of ‘is way. But he’s just the face. His business partner, Mr Gip, is the one you need to speak to.”

“About?”

“You asked me about the backpacker killings,” he said in a near whisper, looking around as if to make certain no one was listening despite the empty bar. “Now, I don’t know about you, but it wasn’t those poor fishermen. I think Bill and Corrine upset someone, stood on the wrong person’s toes, and there’s one thing a Thai can’t do and that’s lose face.”

“What’s that got to do with this Mr Gip?”

“He runs the island, that’s what. Weren’t you listening? Nothing happens here without his say so. Rarely here though because he has bigger fish to fry, runs the Disneyland of brothels in Bangkok, some club, forget the name but your neck of the woods.”

“Why you telling me all this?”

“I’m nothing, shit on their shoes, like those fancy Italian loafers the Yank wears, but someone needs to stop ‘em. Where will it end? The drugs, the sex, now that Bill and Corrine. You look honest, like you care. But not only that, you can actually do something, pen mightier than the sword and all that malarkey,” he said, warmly patting him on the back before he turned away and retook his position behind the bar, staring out into nothingness with watery eyes.

He got up to go, gently swaying, funny everyone was saying he looked sincere, honest but maybe that’s what he needed to become to repay what he’d done in England, which meant he also needed to stop running and grow a pair.

He was four or five large Chang down and he neurotically checked his phone as he stumbled back to his bungalow, already a couple of messages this morning from Lerm demanding he call. The lad made everything seem like a threat, though what else could he threaten given Som had buggered off, pretty much all down to the Thai grassing him up but where would he be otherwise, in that prison called

marriage, that's bloody where. Plus, who else had ever liked him enough to keep calling, Lerm in a very exclusive club that had no other members. Resolving to call him back when he sobered up, if that was ever, he cut through to the beach from Natasha's. Exiting the treeline, he was forced to shield his eyes as the sun reflected fiercely off the white sand. What looked like casualties crumpled under the shade of umbrellas, probably sleeping off last night's hangovers.

Dan sighed, thinking that was the island life for most, party the night away, sleep it off during the day, and repeat. It was no wonder they didn't want to leave, weren't concerned two of their sort had been brutally murdered because paradise deterred critical thinking, especially when drink and drugs were liberally stirred in. He wished he could be similarly blase but knew the old Coconut Island cocktail was lethal. Opening his bungalow door, slinging himself down on the bed, he just wanted it all to go away. None of it felt palatable. The nights were worse because when he closed his eyes all he could see were those images, Bill with the translucent lips, the dark ravine splitting his forehead, while Corrine had the blonde hair stained an angry crimson, the blackened teeth.

The hammering on the door destroyed the warm cuddle of sleep, banging in time to the rhythm of his heart and he immediately jumped off the bed, groggily watching on as the wood splintered, unable to get the words out as framed in the entrance of the bungalow were two uniformed figures. It took him a second or two to unscramble as he cowered on the floor but above him now were Peeklong and the clean-cut copper who'd been at the station this morning, his shiny boots an inch from his face, though they roughly took an arm each and dragged him up to face them.

"Drugs," drawled Peeklong, a smile breaking out on his face as he looked around the sparse room like it was some kind of Aladdin's cave of debauchery.

The other officer let go of him and was rifling through drawers, his bag, all a quick study, and he wasn't worried

because the only drug he was into was the booze. Dan knew they wouldn't find a thing.

"This is too much for one person. So you're a dealer?" said the young officer, who had his back to him but was leaning over the small chest of drawers.

"What?"

"Look," he said, turning around like a magician revealing a trick for in each hand was a sizeable Ziplock bag, one containing what looked like weed, the other pills.

Dan crumpled back onto the bed, shaking his head, mouth as if glued shut. What was there to say? What bloody combination of words could get him out of a complete stitch up.

"Tourist, you better bring your toothbrush. You're going for an overnight stay, but it might well be more than the one night," said Peeklong, laughter echoing around the confined space, walls reverberating with it.

He'd been dumped in the cell, which was dark, the one tiny little window way up near the roof, the black hole stifling, stinking of the body odour, the fear of previous occupants, so resonant it was like he could almost taste it. Dan was transported back to the smell that pervaded the temple, which brought to mind Bill and Corrine, while this was where the fishermen had been locked up before they were carted off to Samui, like he was somehow connected to all their fates.

Swiping away the sweat leaking down his face, he sat on the side of the lumpen bed, throwing aside the scratchy blanket, the place devoid of any semblance of comfort, whipping the phone out of his pocket. It was the one item they hadn't taken from him, though they'd taken everything else, including hope. But scrolling through the scant contacts was like an indictment of his life, Dan unable to identify one friend from the pathetically short list of names, even Som lost to him, Max. With tears in his eyes, a trembling finger alighted on Lerm's number and, taking a deep breath, he dialled.

Chapter 10

“I’m so grateful. Not only the fact you got me out of that hell hole with just a slap on the wrist but that you flew down to be with me. No one’s ever...”

“Don’t. I have the means. It’s nothing, nothing. I couldn’t leave my love in there,” said Lerm.

“But you’ve got to stop all this,” said Dan, shoving the lad’s hand off his, screwing his head away from hungry eyes and looking across the treeline from their elevated perch, sun dipping a flaming orange into the ocean, perfect sunset but unease wracking his body.

“If you’re scared of being seen with me, Danny, you know you hate yourself too. You can’t run away from what you are. I know I’ve tried.”

“Yeah,” he said, lighting a fag, drawing it deep down, exhaling, gulping at his drink, waiting for it to kick in, hoping for the various stimulants to kill his inhibitions, his self-hatred.

“You left your wife, your kid...”

“That was no thanks to you,” he said, slapping a hand down on the table.

“Buddy, look where you are. Look the fuck around you. You wanted this, but you didn’t know it at the time. Now you’re sitting here with me in the most romantic restaurant this side of Bangkok, and you’re downing a beer like waiting for the match to start. No one’s freakin’ fooled.”

“Sorry,” he said, and they both laughed, Dan finally returning Lerm’s smouldering look, almost lost in that smile, those eyes. “It wasn’t an accident that we met that first night, was it?”

“Fuck you! What the hell do you mean? You think I’m

some kind of bunny boiler? You think I'm that desperate I chase any old white dude?"

"Lerm, please, don't take it the wrong way," he said, shrinking back in his seat, the boy flushed with that anger he'd seen flare up briefly before, so mad his lips were curled into a kind of snarl, finger stabbing the air at him.

"So you think I followed you?"

"No, let's drop it."

"Let's."

The silence seemed to descend as quickly as the darkness, efficient waiters in starched white uniforms smilingly lighting candles as the pair of them sat and glowered. How easily the bloody evening had gone from light to a horrible shade of black. Dan glanced furtively at Lerm but the lad was now glued to his phone, face an ugly maroon in the screen's light. He looked around at the other couples, mostly whom he guessed were young honeymooners, high on each other, radiant after a day at the beach, their conversations, the happy, twittering voices seeming to mock them. A waiter hovered over the table, placing down bread rolls, then gone in an instant as though he could sense the angst.

"Look, about before, I don't blame you for telling Som. I wouldn't have had the balls. You know me too well."

"Let's start over. Tonight I mean. No awkward questions, okay? I heart you too much," said Lerm, finding that smile again.

Dan sighed, easing back into his comfortable chair but then did a double take, the boy was buttering his bread roll but on the outside, making it a greasy mess, then daintily trying to pop the whole thing in his mouth, even the snooty waiter giving him a sideways glance. This person, who intimated he was minor royalty, didn't know how to eat a bloody bread roll. Wasn't his accent from some supposedly exclusive international school, he thought, yet Lerm didn't even possess basic table manners.

"I know you said no awkward questions, but how about

awkward problems? Mine's a police-general sized one," said Dan, trying to ignore what he'd just seen, more pressing issues.

"I know."

"You know?"

"I'm connected..."

"Look, I just want to confide in someone. I don't care what you are, who you know, but that night we were together, in your arms, it was home. What you said about running away I can't anymore, you're right."

"It won't go further than these lips, Danny."

"I got drunk back home in England, God I'm pissed now, always am. But I got paralytic drunk, went for a little drive, run over this teenager, Suzie, she was eighteen years old, like bloody Corrine, her eyes when I got out the car as if made of glass, nothing behind them, nothing. I'm a wanted man and I think the police-general knows," he said, trembling all over, vision clouded with tears, feeling the hand on his knee, the one he wanted to always be there.

"I can make it all disappear in a cloud of smoke. Even this Peeklong. Gone."

He smiled, at least he had learnt that from the Thais, because it hid a million different meanings as he balled his hands into fists underneath the table and he wondered whether Lerm was rich, bad or both but then the lad made him so giddy he almost didn't care. Who didn't want someone that could solve all their problems?

"Surprised to find you somewhere like this, Limey," said Von Eil, towering over their table, eyes burning into Dan's after he'd given Lerm a sneering once-over.

"Can't I enjoy my dinner in peace, asshole?"

"I heard it was bread and water last night. And you ought to be careful of the company you keep, look at the friggin' state of her."

"He actually cared. He got me out of that hell hole," said Dan, turning to Lerm but the lad was looking out to sea, like

he hadn't heard, wasn't there.

"Surprised you can afford this on her wages. Likes hanging out on dark beaches, down dark alleys, I heard. Guess you're paying for once. Talking of money, looking out on this vista, I think this used to be for poor farmers, but now all I see is filthy lucre and I want it. No one's going to stop me, especially some hobo that thinks flip-flops are dress shoes," said the Yank, kicking hard at his shoeless feet, before turning and ambling back to the bar, waving over at them dismissively, unable to let it go.

"Why all the hate? You two know each other?" said Dan.

"Never met the guy. Don't know what you're talking about," he replied distractedly, busily paying the bill.

"I thought we were going to eat here..."

"Shhh, heard of room service," said Lerm with a forced laugh.

Dan noticed he wasn't paying with a gold card like before, the one that bore a different name to Chalerm, though this had another moniker entirely and the air felt tense again, had changed in the blink of an eye like at sunset and he simply plastered a smile across his face.

"Where we going now? I thought you said room service?" said Dan with a wink, but the boy just shook his head.

They were walking away in the opposite direction to the stunning beach house Lerm had rented. It was a place that'd taken his breath away after the confines of the dank cell he'd been in just hours ago, symptomatic of the mania of this county, like some sprawling fever dream where one minute he was at his lowest ebb, the next flying carefree, ecstatic above it all. Though he knew there'd be a comedown, wasn't there bloody always?

They continued walking, the Thai lad out in front, stomping across the sand, the pair not knowing each other well enough to make long silences comfortable, this one feeling like it was digging into Dan's soul. But he was already invested because what else did he have now, like this was suddenly

all or nothing, though the deck was loaded – Lerm had the money, he was connected, it was his country and Dan had never felt more a tourist, in a strange land that played by completely different rules, ones that skewed the outcome totally in the host's favour. He desperately wanted to be in that favour again but was simply following, that muscled back up ahead, the thick neck with the angel-devil tattoo turned resolutely away from him, like he was no longer welcome in the space they'd so wonderfully shared just minutes ago. When Lerm finally turned around, the dead eyes, blank stare only underlined the fact they were estranged but Dan was willing to do anything to get back to where they'd been, and he quickened his stride, tugging pathetically at the boy's meaty arm.

The silence persisted but at least Lerm didn't brush the hand away and he clung on as they passed the now familiar bars, the endless thump of the music making the quiet between them less obvious, not as invasive, as though the storm had blown out. Lerm glanced at him again. This time his features had softened, as if he'd remembered the script, that they were lovers not enemies, and hope flared inside him, like a warmth flowering throughout his body. Coco Bananas looked like a cruise liner at full sail as they walked by, lit up over several storeys, a paean to seemingly good times but they were in its shadows, on the fringes of jungle that hadn't yet been reclaimed, which swallowed them in its very particular gloom.

A tingle went through him as they rounded the headland, realising they were approaching Death Beach and almost instantaneously a breeze seemed to blow up from nowhere, the glow of the moon extinguished by a large bank of cloud in what he could've sworn had moments ago been a cloudless tropical night, surf suddenly thundering against the shore. Lerm cupped his hands, lit a cigarette, handed it to him and they came to a stop on the edge of the treeline. Dan drew down the smoke in an effort to stay still even if all he wanted

to do was run as fast he could from this place, though felt his feet sink into the sand, a cold, clammy wetness enveloping them. The moon poked back out the cloud, bathing the beach in white but he looked at the myriad silhouettes, first thinking they were rocks but then noticing mounds of rubbish as far as the eye could see, plastic bottles, various detritus, which always seemed to be magically gone when the backpackers woke from their slumbers, like the Third World had been neatly brushed away but here it was in all its polluted glory, the real face of paradise.

Lerm dragged him roughly away from the beach now, into the jungle, putting a finger to his lips, looking at him all the while, a galloping sound getting closer and closer and closer, ground being pummelled, twigs trampled underfoot, branches snapping, air around them as if disturbed, crackling with a force, an electricity.

“What the fuck,” he said, goose pimples riding up his arms, hairs standing on the back of his neck, wrenching this way and that, trying to follow the sound and even as it seemed all around he couldn’t see anything, just blackness where they were beneath the trees, an impenetrable blackness.

Dan closed his eyes, worried what he might glance upon, that he wouldn’t be able to unsee any horror, though it was like by averting his gaze he’d taken the power away from whatever was making the sound. The thumping receded in his ears, getting more and more remote, the air around them as if calming. Opening his eyes again, Lerm was looking straight at him, a Buddha like serenity on his face.

“I wanted to show you. That’s the bad spirits. They can’t rest because of the violent death. They’ll always roam here. It’s not safe. That’s why I told you to leave it alone. *Farang*, they don’t understand.”

“That’s Bill and Corrine? How?” he said, eyes watery with tears, knees buckling under him, kneading at the earth with fidgety hands.

“Dan, I told you, this place isn’t safe, especially for

foreigners, but you don't listen. Now maybe you will. Come on, let's go," said Lerm, gently pulling him to his feet.

Silence descended again, but he was glad of it now, not wanting to talk about ghosts, or the backpackers, as if it was a kind of sensory overload. He was grateful as they came round the headland, the wind stilling, waves gently lapping the shore, but it was the lights of the bars that heartened him, the whump of the music. Several times in the last day or so they were sights and sounds he thought he'd never experience again, Dan finally breathing out.

They cut through the strip of trees separating the beach from the town, as if Lerm realised he'd had enough, heading back for that room service, he hoped, picturing a generous glass of whisky in his hand, glugging it back before they rolled around on those gloriously silken sheets. Somehow, he allowed himself a smile, and it was like Lerm sensed it, looking across, offering a dazzling grin. But rounding a corner the acrid smell of smoke entered his nostrils, suddenly obscuring part of his vision, vaguely able to make out a swarm of people spilling out of a bar, like they were falling over each other in the rush to exit, their raised voices filling the air. A cracking in his ears, then a blinding flash, and Dan wrenched his face back from intense heat, flames bursting through a corrugated iron roof, shooting an angry red into the night sky. Natasha's was being swallowed whole, and his heart slammed in his chest as he thought of the owner, the man who'd bought him drinks only a few hours ago, the bloke who'd told him what was what.

Running towards the disintegrating building, the screams, he barged straight into what seemed an immovable wall, that stout, barrel-chested figure in the brown uniform, Lerm tugging at his sleeve trying to hold him back.

"Ah, tourist, always turning up where you're not wanted," said Peeklong, flames reflected in those dead eyes.

"What about the English bloke? The man who runs the bar?"

"You let us worry about that and make sure this doesn't

appear in that rag of yours. The resort owners are sick of bad news, and you know what, you're a bad omen. Trouble follows you around."

"Is that a bloody threat!" he shouted, spittle flecking the police-general's medals, in his face, though Lerm had an arm behind his back, wrestling him away.

"I know you do a lot of work for charity cases, but I thought better of you, young Chalerm. You should watch the company you keep. You don't want to be on my shit list too," said Peeklong.

Lerm bundled Dan wordlessly down the street, fierce crackling of the burning building filling his ears, skin tingling with the almost unbearable heat of the blaze, though all he could think of was the bar owner, just hours ago he'd spilled his guts about how the island was run and now was dish of the day, barbecued *farang*. He bent double, puked all over the pavement and finally raising his head, Lerm in his face looking demonic in the glow of the flames, mouth opening and closing like he was saying something but he couldn't unpick the words, instead thinking what the hell had he got involved in. The police-general was right, trouble, death, was following him everywhere he went.

"How the fuck do you know Peeklong? It's like you seem to know everyone that's bad news."

"Hey! I told you, I'm connected, but no more awkward questions. We had a deal. Or I will walk away and leave you in this mess. You don't have many friends right now. Remember who saved you. You owe me, and I'm good at collecting freakin' debts," said Lerm, smile affixed to his face.

Chapter 11

He looked up at the neon sign flickering invitingly outside, announcing Wong's. Day or night it glowed as if to say, "We never close". It wasn't long before he was attacking the cap of his morning beer, having just helped himself from the fridge. Inside it was gloomy, happily always seeming like past midnight, as if some forbidden pleasure and even the fact the air con was perennially broken lent the atmosphere a soupy kind of comfort. The guv'nor gave him a wordless nod with that seeming sixth sense of his, able to talk about anything and everything but somehow instinctively knowing when to keep schtum, Dan back in his sanctuary.

He luxuriated in his favourite seat, looking out a smoked glass window onto the street where he could see out but passers-by couldn't see in, just as well since his apartment was opposite and all the hassle that entailed. Unfolding a copy of the Bangkok Post, it detailed that fifty odd protesters had been killed by government goons. But it wasn't any fight, not a fair one, with the likes of Amnesty International detailing a number of demonstrators – all unarmed – had been shot in the back. Of course, there was no mention of that in the paper or of the fate of those who'd been arrested. He heard they'd been rounded up into cattle trucks, taken to some waste ground, where the youngsters, many university students, were unloaded, lined up, shot in the head and turfed into a pit dug especially for the purpose. They used the loaded term "agitators" in the news reports, like somehow these youngsters, who simply dared to dream of democracy, had been in the wrong and deserved what was coming. The Land of the Smile, he thought, folding the front page in half so he didn't have to look at it anymore.

The Little Ignorant Fucker from Oz hadn't responded directly about the emailed version of his story, which normally meant one thing, it would be killed without debate. However, what wasn't typical is that Frank had actually called him and rather than his usual hectoring self was calm personified, asking ever so politely if they could meet in his office this lunchtime. His unusually matey tone almost bordered on friendliness, which is what most worried Dan. Precisely the reason he hadn't been able to resist the lure of his safe space before the meeting.

He felt so hunted that even the palatial apartment of Lerm's had become claustrophobic, and this morning he told the lad he needed some space. The boy merely nodded, unreadable as ever, but onto the second beer now, and Dan was zoning out, despite his descent from family man to something he would've looked on in horror at before. He toasted his reflection in the glass, though looking at his watch brought him to, it was like time had accelerated, two men were in prison almost literally looking down the barrel of a gun and he knew no matter how dismissive Liffó was, for once he needed to choose fight not flight. Just bloody running off at the first whiff of trouble like he always did was no longer an option. He was their only hope.

"Listen, love, look, I don't have time for your fucking tantrums right now... yeah, well, you can give my dinner to the damn mutt. Don't wait up."

Liffó had waved him in, though the way he was talking out of the side of his mouth into the receiver was like he didn't want to be heard, Dan imagining the put-upon woman on the other end as he slammed the phone down without waiting for a reply. But he smiled to himself at the fact the Little Fucker was actually human, if even the man that lived and breathed the Daily with an antsy kind of intensity had someone, it

meant everyone in this town possessed an angle, a basis for being here or maybe a reason for needing to get away.

“Blow me down. Mate, young Dan, I hear you had a rough ride down south. Trouble seems to be your middle buggerin’ name. You see that out there,” he said, pointing a yellowing finger at the window, traffic bumper to glinting bumper from their high up perch. “That’s a country close to collapse, you can’t even get around Fun City. More barricades going up, more army coming in, more young ‘uns going out in body bags. We have enough trouble on our doorstep.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, no can do, no way flippin’ Jose. We can’t run your story about the fishermen.”

“And you always tell me to grow some bloody balls,” he said, slamming the desk, noticing people in the newsroom were looking through the glass partition, journalists knowing a good story when they see one.

“Son, it’s down to Sommit, the publisher. We already have to tread a tightrope with this flamin’ military government. What we can and can’t say. Now we’re going after the entire justice system over two backpackers...”

“Two backpackers? Two bloody backpackers?! Is that what you see them as? Watch my lips, it’s Bill and Corrine. Frank, they were just kids, tasting freedom for the first time, and someone caved their heads in with a rock. Those fishermen are kids too. You know they didn’t do it. This is meant to be a newspaper, it’s meant to deal in facts, but it’s in the gutter,” he said, slinging a copy of the Daily at his boss, tame front-page headline about some inanity when war raged around them.

“You’re a loose cannon. What you filed, it was unacceptable, conjecture, goes against what all other media are reporting. We’re letting you go.”

“We’re on the ground, you said. Be first, you said. Hold the front page, I gave you the fucking exclusive and now you’re letting me go? You didn’t even have the bollocks to

make that decision, though, did you. It was made from on high. I know how things work here. Stick it up your arse,” he said, wrenching the door open, applause from his reporter colleagues that had seemed like a ripple now a roar in his ears, several patting him on the back, hugging him as he made his way out of the building for the final time knowing he still had a job to do.

His first stop was an internet cafe, though he was trembling as he sat down to the crusty keyboard, lighting up a cigarette, desperate to take the edge off. He accessed his Facebook account, copy and pasted an image of the two Thai fishermen from the BBC News site – the both of them seeming to stare out at him, looking tiny and vulnerable – then added the story he’d filed to Liffu under the headline “Is this justice Thai style?” Sweat slicked fingers slipped off the keyboard as he pressed send, heart thrashing in his chest again, imagining his thousands of followers, courtesy of his notoriety at the Daily, sitting down to this news, something some linen suited twat from the BBC couldn’t give them despite his rounded vowels.

“Hold the bloody front page,” he said aloud, people in the cafe turning round and staring, the crazy *farang* at it again.

He hadn’t really walked the streets since he first arrived in town, when he wanted to acquaint himself but that aim soon fizzled out as he realised Bangkok wasn’t skin deep, it couldn’t be experienced just by looking, you had to just let it take you over, like osmosis, infect you over time, poison and all. But he’d absorbed enough, too much and he couldn’t stand still, he had to walk. It was like that line from Monroe, about gorging himself on all those sickly sweets. Dan was full, an ache twisting his guts, hammering behind his eyes, tummy bursting with angst, head chocker with worries, and he needed to move.

The traffic humming in his ears, the searing heat pounding down from above, the sun lasering through the smog almost blinding him still weren't enough of a distraction from his thoughts, however. No, the quicker he walked, the more his mistakes seemed to catch up with him but the fact he'd just let Som go so easily was not just a mental pain, it was physical, while the loss of his job was only just registering. He jumped as he felt someone grab his arm, a filthy, shoeless beggar in his face, though shaking him off, throwing a few coins down, the last he had, he realised he wasn't too far off that himself. No roof over his head, no job, estranged from his own wife and kid, relying on Lerm's largesse, absolutely beholden to someone that made him sick with lust but that he didn't even know.

He approached what had been the protesters encampment at the intersection of Wireless Road and Rama IV, Lumpini Park a lush green backdrop, but the pavement was scarred, broken, where the Red Shirts had smashed it up and hurled it at the troops. That is until the army turned their guns on them, making a mockery of the flimsy makeshift barricades. Dan shook his head, looking at the old truck tyres, the burnt-out vehicles, the rusted shopping trolleys, which had been no match for the weapons of a professional army, only one winner. The jackboot always came out on bloody top. Bending down, he inspected a large crimson stain going a muddy brown in the heat, then another and another and another, imagining these idealistic youngsters, their life force having oozed out all over this filthy road at the hands of the government. There was no attempt to clean any of it up, almost like it was some kind of monument to fascism, an ominous warning. What chance did Bill and Corrine have when they weren't even sodding Thai, only *farang*, just tourists in the words of everyone's favourite police-general?

He looked one way, then the other, this normally bustling part of town conspicuously empty, even the ubiquitous hawkers weren't around selling their wares, like they'd read

the runes. Peering through the railings of the park a similar eerie quiet pervaded. Maybe people were scared of the bad spirits the killings had roused, thinking back to the island, tingles going through him, wondering where this was all headed, but it was like a fairground ride he couldn't get off, a momentum all its own.

Having had enough of death, he headed back to Silom Road, jumping on the Skytrain. He viewed his dishevelled self in the reflection of the window and finally got how some of his fellow citizens eyed him suspiciously. He'd gone past ashamed though, hitting the can't be bothered stage, which he knew was one up from not wanting to be here or anywhere, realising when he got there it would be karmic payback for what happened in London. But it didn't just happen, did it? He bloody caused it, Suzie's death. Desperate to forget, staring out the train window, the steel and glass towers stretching high into that blinding sky seemed to almost mock him in their richness, aspiration. Who the hell could afford to live somewhere like that? But as he saw the river glinting golden in the sun, he knew the answer, someone like Smale, just the person he needed to mine for information.

“What can I do you for, Danny Boy?” said Smale, opening a door into an apartment that was flooded with light, as if the opening into another world.

“I'm calling in all my favours. Let's see, I'm homeless, jobless and probably about to get divorced. Plus, I want to redeem your offer of my Bangkok induction.”

His opening gambit set the immaculately linen-suited Englishman, like some colonial relic, clucking, shaking his head as he led Dan through the immaculate space adorned with tasteful artefacts of what were probably his many travels. He threw open the doors to an expansive shaded balcony, looking down at the river running golden through the

old heart of Bangkok, even the breeze cooler, fresher up here, like they were once removed. Sinking into a wicker chair, it could've been 1930, not 2010, as a young Thai man appeared, gently asking what he wanted to drink, whether he fancied a "G 'n' T". He simply nodded, thinking this was the expat life he'd heard so much about, for this place wasn't just thirty storeys up, it was light years a-bloody-way.

"All okay? You look, what shall we say, pensive. That's a thousand-yard stare. I've seen *farang* come here before and suffer that. This place is meant to cure all ills," said Smale, spreading his arms wide.

"I explained..."

"Love, seems you've found yourself. Just accept how you are and who you are. No one gives a stuff here. If you do that, you can cope with all the other nonsense this place throws up, but you've also got to be careful."

"Careful?" said Dan, phone disconcertingly vibrating in his pocket every second or two.

"We've got a great vantage point. See that smoke rising. Victory Monument, the protesters set up another camp, looks like either Chin's gone nuclear again or the Red Shirts are razing this place to the blooming ground. Look at the gaps between the buildings, the wasteland, it's just jungle, we're literally sitting in a jungle, that wild aura underpins the whole place. You take a wrong turning here and you're in the swamp."

"Gin and tonics," sung the lad, placing the drinks delicately on the table.

"What the hell have I told you, boy, ice and a slice, this looks like fizzy sodding water," said Smale, but looking distractedly over the balcony at some locals splashing about in the water way down below.

Dan saw the Thai say something under his breath, once pretty face twisted with hate, violence simmering so easily just below the surface at every turn.

"He's a good 'un, really. Don't know what I'd do without him."

“Yeah,” said Dan, looking at the smile affixed to Smale’s face, though his eyes spoke of something else completely. “Do you know a Mr Gip?”

“Bloody hell, really?” he spluttered into his freshly revived G&T.

“Just I remember last time you told me about spending some of your time on Coconut Island and some in Bangkok and you professed to know Von Eil, so you must be acquainted with Mr Gip.”

“Sherlock Holmes, aren’t we? But there’s a certain line I don’t cross here because I value my looks, what little of them left there is. Vain old fool that I am. The likes of Von Eil, Mr Gip, they inhabit a different hemisphere, air up there is thin, hardly habitable by mere mortals. I know of them, but I don’t think anyone really knows them.”

“It’s all just a bloody riddle. Why doesn’t anybody care?” he said, standing up, knee knocking the table, glass of G&T wobbling precariously, equilibrium set off kilter.

“Care? Listen, love, first rule here is look after number one, second is you’ve got to remember nothing comes between a Thai and his money. But because you actually give a shit, I’ll let you into a secret, Mr Gip runs the Red Lantern club, the biggest den of iniquity in this fair city. You need to be a member to enter, but I’m sure you can be imaginative.”

He ran the name of the place over and over silently on his tongue, shivering in the breeze, slinging back his drink. Dan didn’t know whether he was getting closer or further away, but the information felt like things were going in a whole new direction, phone repeatedly buzzing in his pocket.

“Here,” said Smale, flash of silver from his pocket.

Dan looked at the flick-knife that now lay on the table between them, like an unanswered question, pearl handle reflecting the afternoon light, the world even more upside down, the ivory tower of an apartment with the homey antique strewn hallways also housing a lethal weapon.

“What the...”

“Shhh, take it, put it away before the boy gets back and sees it. I won’t be needing it where I’m going. Taking a breather from all this war. But you’re going into the jungle. Like a good Boy Scout, be prepared. Take that as your Bangkok induction done and dusted,” said Smale, patting him on the knee.

He put it silently in his pocket, feeling so weighty there, heavy with anticipation, heart thrumming, excusing himself as he headed to the toilet, needing space. Dan did what he’d wanted to do since he arrived, whipping out the phone, checking his messages, but they weren’t texts, they were Facebook notifications and he was rapt scrolling through hundreds and hundreds of responses to his story, pumping his fist.

He drew out the key and shook his head, never had such an insignificant thing felt so full of meaning, its light weight nothing like the guilt that seemed to dig into his shoulders. Trying to close down his thoughts, plunging it into the lock, the flat was echoey, empty but it was full in other ways, their significant smell, familiar belongings, the mess he’d always complain about but initially secretly loved because it signalled the rough and tumble of family life he’d so desired – toys scattered on the floor, spaghetti hoop stains down the wall, grubby finger marks around light switches. Yeah, life, Dan sighed, knowing Som would be at work, Max at school, since despite the seeming chaos in their lives, there had been an order, a rhythm and looking around the flat, at the untidiness, plates stacked in the kitchen sink as ever, it was all going on despite him and he couldn’t help the heaving sobs.

Swaying, lightheaded, he slumped onto the sofa, realising through the fog this was his seat, the one where he used to goggle at the football and he grabbed the bottle of whisky still in arm’s reach, a forgotten relic of his previous existence. Swigging it back, smiling through the tears, it was like he

hadn't been completely airbrushed out, but pathetically it seemed booze was the only mark he'd left on their life. His eyes moved to the mantelpiece and he wanted to look away because, sure enough, there was an empty space in the middle, wedding photograph once pride of place conspicuously absent. Petty to the last, he lit up knowing she never let him smoke in the flat, wanting to get even in some way as he could still see the photo in his head, ridiculous grins on some Thai beach. He hadn't known then how things could go so wrong on such powdery white sands but even on the so-called best day of his life Dan remembered eyeing up one of the waiters, the lad throwing him that knowing, effortless smile like they did here. It was all so easy, except it bloody wasn't.

Disgusted with the memory, himself, he threw the half-finished ciggie into the half-finished bottle of whisky. The fag fizzled and died, dead in the water, like the marriage. That's why he didn't care about leaving undetected, he knew he'd never be back. But not leaving undetected didn't mean this, going bolt upright as a key going into the lock sounded like a gunshot, frantically trying to concoct a story, though his brain was just mush as footsteps echoed on tiles, getting closer, closer, closer.

"Mr Dan, you're back! *Khun* Som told me you'd gone away for a while," said the cleaner, having bustled into the room.

Speechless, though looking at the dumpy woman standing there cloth in hand, he wanted to laugh out loud. The cleaner, course it was the fucking cleaner. She came once a week, halle-a-bloody-lujah!

"Sorry, I'm back a bit earlier than expected. Do you mind coming back tomorrow as I'm about to have a nap. Long journey and all that. Been away with work," he said finally.

"Yeah, yeah sure."

She eyed the bottle, then him but simply turned away, let herself out in a sad silence, Dan feeling like a constant disappointment even to a lady who tidied away other people's

mess. He wondered whether she'd be straight on the phone to Som, but what did it matter, not as though he was planning to stick around.

He patted his right pocket, the uncomfortable bulk of the knife there, signalling how far he'd fallen, as did the fact he was padding into the bedroom now, shoulders slumped, realising how desperate he was, so desperate even the cleaner had seen it. But then there was the greater good, a bit like how Som and Max had been his justification for fleeing to Thailand rather than fessing up to his crime. Reaching for the heavy shoebox on top of wardrobe, stealing could be legitimised by his pledge to uncover the truth around the murder of Bill and Corrine, couldn't it? Well, bloody couldn't it? But his hands shook as he threw the rainy day money into a holdall he'd brought specifically for the purpose, the bricks of notes slipping through his sweaty fingers. Rainy day money Som had insisted they keep at home in case they needed to make a quick getaway. Dan replaced the horribly light feeling shoebox back in its dusty spot. In five paces he was out of the tiny apartment, knowing there was no going back now, having exited his old life forever.

Chapter 12

He was walking everywhere again, not because he wanted to think but because he couldn't sit still. Even having sat in his old chair in the flat, it was like the panic was about to engulf him, breaths coming quicker now just reliving it but he wanted to kill that thought, all of them as he dodged and weaved through the Silom Night Market. Vendors getting into his face with a sneer, eager to sell him a "sex DVD" or pretty much anything, he knew, if he was prepared to pay. Instead, Dan brushed them aside like the Bangkok veteran he'd become, while he waved away the kerb crawling tuk tuk drivers looking to whisk off another white ghost to some dodgy club, coughing deeply as he passed a huddle of food stalls, chilli so thick in the stultifying atmosphere he could taste it. Still, it was the best part of the day in the city. As soon as the sun set the place came alive, white heat replaced with a soupy kind of air that enveloped you like a warm bath. The neon burned, the smiles were turned up a notch, land of opportunity Thai style.

The phone continued to vibrate in his pocket, shaking his head, sense of a runaway train, this thing having a momentum all its own. No clock ticking in terms of the splash he needed to file, but he knew he didn't have long to save the fishermen, unable to get them out of his head, knowing the authorities wanted them neatly erased from history Asap so they could go back to the party line of "Thailand is open for business". The Chinless Wonder loved that bloody phrase, as though it bestowed some kind of cachet on the place but looking around it was tawdry – the girlie bars, the boy bars, the not quite sure bars and the general accoutrements to go with them, ramshackle stalls showcasing fake Rolexes, Louis

Vuittons, Pradas, all offered with a smile as a grubby hand lifted money out of your pocket. It was that kind of business.

Soi Cowboy now, one of the places not in the Tourist Authority of Thailand's brochures, yet as he looked around it was full of white men, sweating, red-faced white men draped over young women in the countless bars. Dan heard the girls had often quit a dusty, drought-ridden hometown in the dirt-poor north for work in the grim factories that ringed the outskirts of Bangkok making the likes of toothpaste and shampoo so people from the West could pick up their toiletries for a pittance. Often a friend of a friend would tell them they might quadruple their earnings by not offering toiletries but themselves to those same Westerners, and then there was no going back, a Pandora's box opening. What choice did they have? He knew, as girl after girl pawed at him as he continued walking, that explained the jaded looks, the hard stares, the hatred in those yes. It was that kind of business.

The steel and glass towers of Sukhumhit loomed above him, an almost exaggerated opulence like those who owned it really wanted to rub it in, a legless beggar shuffling up to him on stumps, arms prostrated pathetically in front holding a half full bowl of coins only emphasising the point. Sidestepping the man like he didn't exist, he continued on, but the sick scraping of skin on concrete filled his ears as the beggar pursued him. Dan turned, looking into the man's eyes that seemed to roll back in his head, but then the vagrant drew a quivering hand across his throat. He rugby kicked the bowl, sending coins skittering through the air like shrapnel, then began running, shoving his way through a crowd of people, sweat mixing with the tears.

Turning a corner, breathing so hard he had to lean on a parked car, Dan finally looked back, no sign of the beggar, other people breezing past him like what he'd just done hadn't even registered but he was shaking, wondering how it had come to this. The weight of the holdall was heavy in his

hand, but it was the guilt that crushed him, a thief now, someone who attacked beggars, cheated on his wife, knocked down and killed teenage girls and looking ahead at the burnished Red Lantern sign he sensed it was his only shot at atonement.

The neo-gothic edifice was so elaborate it was like something out of a film set, gilded staircase up to the entrance of the club appropriately framed by red neon lights burning so bright they made him squint. In the foreground, a car park out front littered with Ferraris, Bentleys, Maseratis caused him to spit on the ground, that exaggerated opulence all over again, thinking back to the beggar, the Red Shirts manning their pathetic barricades just down the street probably squatting down to instant noodles for dinner on their tarpaulins. Little wonder civil war was in the air, he thought.

As he got closer, he spotted the immaculately turned out doorman, but Dan knew most were have-nots in this town even if they looked like they had it all. Grabbing tighter to the holdall, knuckles white, he knew it was worth a punt, that thing about money buying anything in a place like this. Yeah, it could purchase an audience with Mr Gip, and though it might not lead anywhere, some sixth sense told him he needed to try, like looking behind the curtain in Oz, having to know. Gingerly walking up the steps, Pound Shop brogues squeaking conspicuously on marble, he kept his gaze level with the doorman, needing to brazen it out. Money opened most doors in Thailand as people had fuck all, the one lesson he'd learnt. Not that he was judging. In their position, who wouldn't do the same bloody thing? And looking into the man's eyes, trying to read the unreadable, he knew it wasn't really his rainy day money anyway, not anymore, for once nothing to lose but somehow it felt like everything.

"Sir, can I help you," he said.

The bouncer's smile was turned up full beam, dazzling, though the beady eyes were scrutinising, Dan knowing his cheap blousy shirt, scratchy trousers and sensible shoes were

a giveaway, though he simply unzipped the holdall, shoved the cash under the doorman's nose, hoping he'd smell it, be unable to resist the temptation of those crisp notes.

"I want to see Mr Gip," said Dan, and the lad, no more than twenty, looked him up and down and then flashed that enigmatic smile again.

Looking first over one shoulder, then another, the doorman swiped the bag and waved him through the entrance, Dan glad he'd padded out the bottom of the stash with bundles of old newspaper just like in the movies. He wasn't that bloody silly, he thought with a grim smirk, squeaking into the lobby, almost breathless as he looked up at a vast atrium that was studded with artificial stars. Serene, perfumed, the place stretched out before him like a vast marble sea, so air-conditioned cold it caused goose pimples to ride up his arms, though he knew it wasn't just the chill. A kimono-clad young ladyboy behind a reception desk beckoned him over, lashes as long as her nails, eager to please smile on her face like she was checking him in to fly on some boutique Asian airline.

"Welcome to our VIP experience," she said, those lashes fluttering, identikit smile to the doorman.

Without waiting for a reply, she grabbed his arm in a surprisingly firm grip. Dan bathed in her hypnotic, perfumed aura as they headed for the lifts. He didn't know where to look as they lurched upwards, the mirrored walls reflecting her face back to him myriad times, making it impossible to flinch from an unwavering gaze. But the loaded silence was swiftly broken as the doors opened and in rushed booming sound, strobe lighting making it hard to see what was in front of him in the semi-darkness as he stumbled out, weird chemical smell in the air only adding to the disorientation.

His eyes adjusted to the gloom, writhing human shapes picked out in silhouette by the flashing lights, what looked like bodies on top of bodies but all moving to the frenetic beat. He was rapt by the semi-naked throng as he was dragged along, looking at the mostly old white men gyrating

with their more youthful Thai partners, hunters and hunted, Dan realising with a shudder the smell was amyl nitrate, hinting at the warped darkness of it all.

“We’ve been expecting you,” said another kimono-clad hostess as he was deposited in a bar area partitioned off from the main dancefloor.

It was brighter lit, with extravagant chandeliers hanging down in the cavernous space, leather sofas arranged pleasingly around table after table groaning with drinks and edged elegantly with soft pink mood lighting. Dan noticed the sofas peopled with similar clientele to those on the dancefloor, though several of the Thais were reclined so far back they looked like they were being devoured by their dates.

“Just yourself, isn’t it? Don’t worry, you’ll be getting some company,” said the hostess, putting a long-nailed hand to her enhanced pneumatic chest, guiding him to an empty table.

He slid onto the sofa as instructed, gulping as he did so, looking at the empty space opposite, jamming his legs under the table to stop them trembling. The piano player tinkling away the total antithesis of the madness raging around his head, the place Coco Bananas all over again. Yes, that was it, thought Dan, *deja bloody vu* looking at the artfully done bar with the backlit bottles of expensive booze but then at the grotesque mismatches at the other tables, a brothel masquerading as a swanky cocktail lounge, Thai fairground hall of mirrors, the seeming trademark of the empire run by Von Eil and Mr Gip.

The hostess returned with a bottle of champagne, slung artfully in a silver bucket, of course, placing two ice-cold flutes down on the table. He went to open his mouth, but she simply waved away any interrogation, completely disinterested, shooting him that smile as she turned on her stacked heel. Again, the twisting in his guts, that knot across his back seizing up his shoulders, but he poured the drink, needing the fix, though the second glass sat there like yet another puzzle.

“Here’s your guest, sir. Enjoy,” she said, having returned, dispatching a Thai who hovered uncertainly.

He felt the bile in his throat, as even in the murk, he could see the lad wasn’t more than twenty and Dan wanted to run and never look back, heart quickening as the piano from before was replaced with the rapacious beats of the trance music from earlier.

“What’s your name?”

“Dan,” he said, having to turn away, the flesh-baring outfit grim on his scrawny body but pointing at the seat opposite, in one way wanting never to set eyes on him again, though needing to know.

He heard the ice in the bucket rattle, looked on as the lad poured himself a drink, eased back into the soft leather, like he’d done it a thousand times before. The whole place a tableau of depravity, thought Dan, as a man with a lizard-like tongue on an adjoining table was slobbering all over his date and all he could do was look down, stare at the floor.

“Cheers,” said the lad, tapping his arm as he raised his glass.

“What’s your name, love?” he said, taking him in properly for the first time, but it was the eyes, those dark-rimmed, sad eyes that took his breath away, like he was winded.

“Moi,” he said, barely audible above the music.

“What about your parents? College?” he replied, turning over and over what looked like a business card Moi had inexplicably handed him, inadvertently shoving it in his pocket.

“Parents?” he said with a shrug.

“Family. What about your family?”

“No family,” he said, lowering his eyes to threadbare shoes.

“How bloody old are you, for God’s sake?”

The lad looked him straight in the eye, a glint of something there, as if he’d been asked numerous times before, eager to please. “Eighteen”

“You’re eighteen, sodding eighteen years old. You should be in college, university,” said Dan, shaking his head again

and again, punching the sofa so hard Moi flinched, other patrons looking over. "Sorry, I didn't mean... look, where do you stay?"

"Dormitory. They drive us there."

"They? This is sick. Bloody sick," he said, kneading his nails into his palms, drawing blood, unable to bring his gaze from the floor, a gaze clouded by tears, feeling his heart quicken, sweat breaking out all over his forehead, moisture dripping down his back.

"What's wrong, mister?" said Moi, grabbing at his arm again.

Dan thrust a hand into his pocket, brought out a wad of notes he'd saved from the holdall, threw them crumpled onto the table, then pointed to the lad, the exit, watching as he expertly scooped up the money before leaving without another word, job done for the night.

"You didn't like him? Mr English, you can have anything you want. You want male? Female? Something in-between? What's your fantasy?" said a brutishly built Thai man looming above him as if appearing from nowhere.

"They're kids, just kids. Eighteen years old!"

"Calm, I like calm in my club. Just listen, they're all adults, here of their own accord, but they know there are always alligators, lions and lizards out to get them. This is Thailand, *farang*, law of the jungle."

"What does that even mean, and who the bloody hell are you? Trying to defend the indefensible, explain the inexplicable," he said, looking at the man dressed in an immaculate dark suit, hair gelled into a shiny brown helmet akin to the body of a cockroach, while the deep scar running from his right eye to the edge of his lip hinted at what was simmering just under the surface.

Letting the question hang in the air, the man got down on his haunches, eye level now, silence growing. Dan was stuck for words, drawn to the scar, a deep indent that seemed to throb with a life its own, twisting and wobbling with his sick

smile, the man who hadn't blinked once and continued staring as he put a hand gently on his shoulder, the lightest of touches with the heaviest of meanings.

"Don't worry, I know all about you, Mr English. I'm Mr Gip, your Thai nightmare. Look up," he said, pointing at a camera in the ceiling. "You offered that young man money. It's all on film. You're looking at a few years in prison. You know what we do with sick *farang* like you. Funny, the English are the worst, but it's not funny haha."

He'd addressed him so gently, was so plausible, all Dan could do was shake his head, looking at the expensive suit, calculating it cost more than he was worth right now. And looking around the club again, seeing Thais being mauled by so many white ghosts with rabid expressions, he jumped to his feet, wrenching at the knot of Gip's slippery silk tie to get at his throat. The man merely pushed him away with extreme force from arms so muscled they strained at that finely cut fabric, and he plopped back onto the sofa.

"Please, don't make a scene in my club. Don't think you can just sneak around like a rat, let's talk about this face to face in my office, like real men," he said, clicking his fingers in Dan's face, beckoning him to follow.

At the top of a flight of narrow stairs, where even the icy air conditioning couldn't pervade, Dan squirmed as the sweat rolled down his scalp, choking at the smell of too many perspiring human bodies thick on the air. Mr Gip threw open a door, clicking on a light, vast windowless space with mirrored walls, gym equipment scattered about, accounting for the man's bulk, while an expansive desk brimming with photos of young men and women, indicated some weird gym cum office cum audition hall. Hovering awkwardly, his eyes then wandered to a bank of TV screens behind the desk as the Thai sat in a large leather throne, lord of the manor, each monitor offering a different view of the Red Lantern, as though he had every angle covered. Mr Gip pointed to a seat on the opposite side of the desk, a wordless order.

“I can zoom in if I want,” he said, catching Dan’s eye, playing with a little joystick in front of him and sure enough one of the screens was offering what was now an unappetising close up of a couple pawing at one another.

He was laughing as he handed him a drink from what looked like an expensive bottle of malt and sitting back down Mr Gip reclined, like an animal completely at home in its own habitat, while Dan gripped the sides of his chair to stop the trembles but having to let go at regular intervals to take a shaky swig.

“So you say you have a video of me trying to entice the boy,” he said, raising a finger, leaning forward in his chair. “But look at what’s going on around you. What you permit to happen in your club.”

“Mr English, you got me all wrong. I’m just the zookeeper here, I’m not one of the animals. I just provide, shall we say, the food and water. This...” he said, waving at the screens. “This is nothing to do with me. And that’s why I’m up here and you’re in your piss stinking slum. The law of the jungle.”

“What if I don’t agree with the law? Everyone keeps telling me I’m *farang*, a tourist, Mr bloody English,” he said, slamming down his glass.

“Look, I’m going to show you something, maybe you’ll understand then.”

Mr Gip unloosened his tie, undid a top button, wiped a thin patina of sweat from his wide forehead with a silk handkerchief, hands almost imperceptibly shaking, as though even he was unnerved. He flipped up a laptop screen, turned it to face Dan, and selected a video file.

“What’s this?”

But there was only silence, his heart racing, sweat oozing off him as the images on the screen began unfolding. A man was tied to a chair in a space that looked identical to this one, a white man sat where Dan was sitting, another figure looming into the frame, thickset, suited, clearly Gip, wielding a baseball bat, making contact with the man’s head over and

over and over until it lulled sickly to one side, mashed and misshapen. As a last flourish, the Thai turned with a triumphant smile to the camera, silk shirt spattered with blood.

“You should’ve seen the laundry bill. So easily done, though, like smashing a watermelon. He upset me. I suggest you don’t. I want you out of my country by tonight. If you go now, you won’t hear from me again.”

Dan ran, blundering out the door, down the stairs, didn’t stop before reaching the pavement way below, crumpling to the ground, quaking at what’d happened. He knew this was bigger than Peeklong, Von Eil, but he didn’t understand what he’d unearthed. Pulling back the curtain of Oz had only led him to another hall of mirrors, though given the reaction he knew somehow he was closer to finding the truth about Bill and Corrine, but he now had less time and even more questions. In the past he would’ve let Gip walk all over him, but he had London to pay back, two backpackers’ deaths to avenge, the fishermen to save. But then it dawned on him as he slammed a fist into his own thigh, the money, what about the bloody rainy day money? All gone.

“No!” he screamed, imagining Mr Gip rifling through the holdall with those murderous hands, counting out his gains with that sick smile, yet here he was in the gutter but an energy surged through him as he wrenched his head up from the filthy pavement where he was sprawled to the glittering edifice of the Red Lantern knowing he had wrongs to right.

Dan shook as he lit a cigarette, finally managing a smile despite everything as he was different, motivated but knew he needed help and there was only one person left on his dwindling list.

Chapter 13

He was still getting Lerm's voicemail, seemingly feast or famine with him, unobtainable, off the grid, like he was playing hard to get but to paraphrase one of his favourite Morrissey tracks, the more the lad ignored him, the closer he got. Dan gnawed furiously at his nails, fidgety, unable to sit still, moving again, witnessing another Bangkok morning, cars gridlocked in both directions as he strolled on. The Paradise Hotel had been home for the night, the cheapest place he could think of amid the fact he'd blown nearly every baht on an absurd gamble and on account of the Thai lad being AWOL there were no other options. He'd like to say he slept, but lying wide-eyed, staring at the stained polystyrene ceiling tiles didn't count. Mr Gip's warning meant he should've already been cowering in some dusty border town, but Lerm's promise to make it all go away still gave him hope. The shirts from Jermyn Street, shoes from Milan, cologne from Paris were worn like a suit of armour in the Third World, designed to intimidate, but it was the snarl, born of Dan did not know what that saw the boy get his way. He hadn't seen anyone dare say no, and he needed that on his side, he also needed the lad's dosh, lots of it, lips quivering, eye throbbing, body wracked by tics every time he thought of the rainy day money, what it meant and where it'd bloody gone.

Entering the lobby, the guard was in deep conversation with one of the residents and he sidled across the lavishly tiled floor to the lifts. The businessman expat exiting gave him one of those looks as if he'd X-rayed what was on his mind, but Dan was used to it by now, people viewing him like he was scum, shrugging it off as he was whisked upwards. He

padded along the richly carpeted hallway, taking in the views afforded by the panoramic windows, smoke still billowing from parts of the city, though he'd heard General Chin had urged another crackdown on the Red Shirts, promised a "final solution" – his chilling words. But you couldn't defeat a point of view, a feeling, he thought as he came to Lerm's door, invitingly ajar. The place smelled lemony fresh, a mop and bucket incongruously in the passageway, someone humming, but then Dan saw her, causing the lady to drop her duster that had been poised above some artefact.

"Mr Lerm not here," she said in pidgin English.

"I'm his friend. Can I wait in there?" he said, nodding and smiling, the universal language of inanity but brushing past her into the living room, daring her to object.

He luxuriated in one of the antique chairs, so comfortable it was like floating on air, laughing to himself, thinking that's where Lerm had mauled him the other night, with love of course. It may have disgusted him before, but the last few days put things in perspective, like he had nothing left to lose. Though joyful feelings never lasted long in this place, a copy of the Bangkok Post staring up at him from the coffee table causing his shoulders to tense, the jumble of words in his mangled brain finally making sickening sense – "Prosecution seeks death penalty in backpacker slaying case"

Hearing the front door click shut, cleaner discreetly leaving him to it, he couldn't sit still as he threw the paper down, having to pace. He entered the bedroom, but something didn't feel right. He traced the totally unlined sheets of the perfectly made bed with clammy hands, the unslept in bed indicating he'd not been home last night. But where the hell was he and why wasn't he picking up the phone?

Looking around impatiently for any hint, his attention was drawn to the massive image of Coco Bananas on the wall, like he was seeing everything for the first time, finally able to scrutinise without the boy around. Lerm had denied the wall hanging was Coconut Island, but the more he looked at it, the

more obvious it became, and it felt significant even if it told him nothing other than highlighting the fact he'd felt the need to lie about it. Dan lit a fag, wresting open doors to a walk-in closet he often saw the lad disappear into, stumbling in himself, brushing past row after row of sober suits, though most looked too big for the boy. Same with the shoes. Looking for anything, an answer, he was rooting through drawers now, more and more clothes, until his hand touched something plastic in a dark recess, feeling so alien to the finest silk, the Egyptian cotton, the leather of just moments ago and dragging it out into the light was a skeleton mask, setting his hand trembling, heart thumping. It gawped back at him with those vacant hollows where eyes should've been, taking him back to the motorbike that'd nearly run him down, the men on the speedboat, the rabid spirits of that night on the beach as though now running riot in the flat.

Re-entering the living room, he scanned it as if with new eyes looking for clues, but to what crime he didn't actually know. He slung the mask on the coffee table, it landing like a question mark in the immaculate, well-heeled space but then he noticed it, them, the slightly discoloured rectangular marks on the wall, gaps, where it was obvious pictures had once hung. Tracing his fingers around their perimeter, Dan wondered what the lad was hiding, trying to think back to that first night of passion, whether they'd been there then. It was like anything that could provide a clue to his identity was neatly packaged away somewhere, boxed off, thinking with a chill that he didn't even know Lerm's surname, his identity a mystery, like the various credit cards he wielded that seemed to bear different identities.

He padded to the fridge, that of the wealthy bachelor, one of Bangkok's most suitable, if anyone knew who he actually bloody was; shelf after shelf of champagne but he grabbed a more utilitarian can of beer from the pocket in the door. His drinking jags seemed to be getting earlier and earlier, but there he had no filter anymore, zero boundaries, Som not

around to Hector or Max to tell him Daddy's breath smelled "yuk". He tried to dismiss the thought, looking out the window, absently peering out the side of the building that offered him a view of the forecourt below, immaculately attired doormen attending to the comings and goings of residents being ferried around in their shiny cars. It was odd, since they must've had to glide past the encampment of Red Shirts just down the road but a world away, Dan imagining it caused most of them to sink a little deeper into their leather seats, to stare a little harder at the screens of their phones.

A sleek black Merc pulled into the U-shaped driveway and he watched as the passenger door opened, wondering who it would disgorge this time, though rather than typically well-dressed he noticed something that stood out even from this height, a young lad in a singlet, painted on jeans as if dolled up for the Bangkok night. His heart took a leap as the boy stopped, hesitated at the driver's side window and leaned in for a long, lingering kiss but then he looked up, as if scanning the building, causing Dan to jump back as the lad's eyes locked on to the apartment so many storeys up but he'd seen enough to know, it was unmistakably Lerm.

Finishing the beer in two quick gulps, he lit another cigarette, began pacing again, wanting to erase the thoughts flooding into his head with each step but one continued to pile on top of another, his mouth going dry, sweat leaking down his back. The sound of the key entering the lock was like a gavel smashing down, the final hammer blow on a coffin nail.

"Danny, fancy seeing you here. What a lovely surprise," he said, breezing into the room, eyes briefly passing over the mask, as though completely attuned to even a slight disruption to the equilibrium.

No one called him damn Danny, maybe his Nan when he was about eight, but now it seemed overfamiliar, and he just stood, swaying slightly, sucking down the remnants of the cigarette, trying to make out who he was looking at, *what*. Lerm appeared as though he'd come straight from some

nightclub, that defiant don't ask, don't tell look on his face. The skimpy clothes, the dishevelled hair, like a completely different animal from the tailored perfection he normally presented to the world, though maybe that was all an elaborate bloody disguise. And as he came in for a kiss, Dan could smell it on him, the booze, fags and if deceit had a smell, he knew this was it. It was also in his eyes, eyes that normally gave nothing away, but it was a look that forbade any kind of questions, dissent, though instead betrayed guilt, a shiver running through Dan as it reminded him of the first night on the island.

"You never did say but who the fuck were you having dinner with when we first met? Certainly in a rush to get back to him."

But silence persisted other than a large sigh Lerm let out as he walked to the fridge, grabbing a bottle, struggling with the cork but when it popped champagne fizzed all over the floor, though he managed to catch some as he messily poured it into two glasses, handing one to Dan.

"What are we celebrating?" he said, chugging it then banging the glass down.

"Too many questions, buddy. What did I tell you before..."

"Lerm, for God's sake. I left my wife for you, my kid! I need to know what I'm dealing with," he said, in the lad's face now, wheeling his arms around.

"*What* I'm dealing with, like I'm some kind of thing. You've freakin' lost the plot. Look at the state of you. Check yourself out. No, go on, take a good look. Who'd wanna be with that," he said, manhandling Dan towards a full-length mirror, fingers spearing into his shoulders.

His eyes were blurred by tears, the Thai's words cutting through him, each utterance making him feel worthless as he looked away from his reflection, couldn't bloody stand it, instead glancing down at his shabby shoes, hand clamped around the pathetic surfeit of notes in his pocket, all he had

left but he had to know, shaking loose of Lerm and his gouging fingers, wrenching back around to face him.

“I saw you, I fucking saw you just now climbing out of that Merc, going back in for a snog before your fancy man drove off. The guy you were with last night. And what about the mask? That’s what those fuckers on Coconut Island were wearing when they wanted to finish me off. That speedboat, the dark sea, thought I was going to die... Just a bloody coincidence, is it? Well, is it?!”

Lerm slammed the champagne flute down, cracking of glass reverberating through the pristine apartment, as if scoring through its flawless sheen, laying waste to it, unearthing the lie as Dan felt the pointed stem graze the underside of his chin, poking him with a dagger-like sharpness. He stood frozen, trying with all his being to stop the trembles that were quaking inside, knowing one move and the glass would rip right through his pulsing veins. He was face to face with himself, rapt by the image in a ridiculously ornate mirror, expression twisted in fear like Edvard Munch’s scream but Lerm’s look of cool calculation indicated he was ready for anything, that he knew exactly what he was doing, he’d been here before.

“Man,” said the boy, letting out a whistle through his teeth, expression morphing into an animalistic snarl.

Dan was fixated at Lerm’s image in the mirror, at those craggy, uneven teeth, so at odds with the row upon row of pristine suits in his closet, the shiny Oxford brogues, the immaculate apartment as the lad continued to jab the jagged flute at his neck. A globule of blood rolled down the glass, forming a blemish on the blonde wooden floor.

“What did I say about asking questions? I can give you anything, every-friggin’-thing you want, desire but don’t question me. It’s a Halloween mask, okay. Ever heard of trick or treating?” he said, finally removing the glass from his neck, laughing, like the last few minutes had never happened, scrunching up the skull mask in his fist.

Lerm disposed of the blood covered stem in the bin, along with the mask, ushering them away like some embarrassment. Taking a handkerchief out of his pocket, it morphed from white to an angry crimson as he applied it to the small wound on Dan's neck. A silence descended on the apartment, a calm, just the sounds of both of them breathing hard. Twisting the hankie out of the Thai's hand, lightheaded, feeling like his legs were going to give way, he fell back onto the sofa, what had just happened going again and again through his head but pawing at the pathetic sheaf of notes left in his pocket the words "I can give you everything you desire" screamed in his skull.

"I'm in trouble. Big trouble. I went to the Red Lantern and confronted Mr Gip..."

"You did what?"

Dan watched on as the lad threw his palms skyward, another of his nonchalant gestures, but his face visibly paled, looking almost translucent, fear written there, the first time he'd ever looked off balance, scared. He began to shake himself, glancing out the window at the sprawl of the city, wondering at the enormity of who he'd upset, what he'd done, that this man in front of him, someone willing to kill him yet pledge to offer him everything was all he had left. He bit into his lip hard, tasting blood.

"He told me I have to leave Bangkok, today. I've got nothing left, no one, no money, no bloody home. Finished."

Lerm eased down on the sofa, put an arm around Dan to stop the shuddering sobs. The Thai was so close and feeling his warm breath, he wished he could stay here forever, though glancing at the angel-devil tattoo, it'd never seemed more appropriate.

"I can give you everything, but I can't get you out of this. General Chin had his birthday party at the Red Lantern courtesy of Mr Gip, those two are buddies. We call them high-so, high society, you don't fuck with them. I'll give you the dough, as much as you want, but you need to get out the

country, go on the down low for a bit.”

“I didn’t realise Mr Gip was Our Dear Leader’s entertainments officer. Bloody hell, what’ve I done,” he said, swallowing back the tears, shaking his head but thinking back to the lad at the Red Lantern, the lad who was being kept a virtual prisoner in the dorm and his body began to tingle, knowing this was all fate, time to repay some of that karmic debt, needing to do one thing before he ran like a rat again, unwilling to be a complete coward all his life.

“Buddy, you’re just looking like you’re not seeing right now, completely lost. You may wanna walk out that door and never see me again, I wouldn’t blame you. And it might not make any difference, but Dan, my Danny, I love you.”

Those three little words rattled round his head, blotting absolutely everything out, he tried to speak, couldn’t but knew in moments of doubt, despair they’d be lodged there to give him some kind of strength. Even when Som had said it, it didn’t have the same effect because he couldn’t reciprocate, not genuinely. But the warm fuzziness was fleeting as ever, noticing the discarded copy of the newspaper again, feeling breathless, knowing if he ran he’d be leaving behind the Thai fishermen to their awful fate, that he’d never find out the truth about Bill and Corrine despite all the good intentions, the hollow bugging promises. He’d also be leaving someone who just said he loved him. Dan put his head in his hands and began shaking with sobs again, Lerm’s consoling words may as well have been in a foreign language.

Chapter 14

He came out of Lerm's, the apartment block towering above him, Dan completely in its shadow, though that's where he felt he belonged, bouncing around at the bottom of the pile, no job, no significant other, no home. Checking his phone, the Facebook messages had grown, though he was drawn to one poster – Thai_truthseeker – who'd been the most prolific and while they weren't willing to divulge much other than opinion, they were insistent that the fishermen didn't do it. What set him – if it was a him – apart from all the other keyboard warriors was not just persistence but a supposed willingness to meet face to face, lending it all some kind of credence. Other priorities like staying alive had got in the way, but he'd messaged back a willingness to connect when “he could”. He just didn't know when that'd bloody be at the moment, doubting Mr Gip's deadlines were particularly elastic.

Dan stamped a heel down on one of the cockroaches skittering around on the grease-slicked pavement, staring down forlornly as an awful mustardy type of pus emanated from the insect's shell, realising he was only a short stroll from Lerm's place but a world away. He was immersed again in the grime of the city's red-light district and while at night the tacky neon and glitter, the sequins and feather boas, the cabarets and strip shows lent it a kind of seedy allure, in the daytime it was an abomination. He wrinkled his nose up at the stench of sewage belching out from the open drains beneath his feet as the unflinching glare of the sun added an unwelcome layer of scrutiny, revealing the face of the so-called developing world unadorned.

When he'd weighed up doing a runner from his previous life, this is not what he imagined. He'd filtered out all the

realities, the dirt, the X-rated scenes, but now he was living it. There wasn't even a safe space anymore, no Som, no Max and walking down the street with leaden legs, Dan had never felt more alone. Lerm's, "I love you" had pierced through all the noise of the last few weeks but it couldn't help him now, no one could, somehow he had to grow up and resolve it all himself, though it might involve asking for the odd favour along the way, which was his motivation now as he pushed open yet another bar door.

"Why the bloody hell are we meeting here?" said Dan breathlessly, wiping away the sweat from his forehead, sitting opposite Smale.

"Patpong in the daytime isn't a pretty sight, I know, dear boy, plus it's rather hot out. But I wanted you to experience some of the old Bangkok before the place was beautified."

"Beautified? Mike, beautified isn't a term I'd use to describe this... this hellhole."

"Awful now, is it? Don't become one of those *farang* constantly complaining. You know why you're here. You've got to turn a blind eye to certain things or you'll go mad."

"Thanks. I don't have anyone else to turn to," he said, banging a fist down on a baby cockroach zig-zagging its way across the table. "You weren't kidding about the old Bangkok, were you?"

"Ha, no. This is Mizu's Kitchen. Been here since the Vietnam War. Great food, Wagyu beef is the speciality, but just don't inspect anything too closely," he said, holding up a smeared glass, polishing it on an immaculate sleeve.

"Seems to be the motto of the whole place. Don't look too closely."

"You can't do anything about it. This is a jungle, survival of the fittest and all that. As I said when we met before, I'm getting away for a bit, war-weary but what's on your mind?"

"Does it mean those of us that stay all have to turn the other cheek? Look, I was at the Lantern last night and I saw what happens there. This young man, university age..."

“Coming over all Mother Theresa, are we? Why am I not surprised? That earnestness can get you killed in a place like this.”

“I have morals.”

“Morals,” said Smale, throwing his head back and laughing so hard his grey mane quivered. “Then sign up and become a missionary or some such. Don’t make a home in Bangkok. Morals my arse.”

“I didn’t expect you to understand. Why would you?” said Dan, stabbing at the air, eyes blazing, cheeks glowing red.

“Dear boy, you were at the Lantern last night and you talk about morals. I did warn you.”

“Listen, I need to do something to help. I need to get the lad, Moi was his name, out of this dormitory they’re kept in. Kept like battery hens. Can you sodding believe it. Locked up they are, then let out at night to be preyed on. If I can save at least one,” he said, looking away, eyes blurred with tears.

“You’ve really got it bad.”

“They’re almost kids. Moi was eighteen,” he said, smashing down a fist.

“Oh, spare me the liberal leftie hand wringing. It’s awful, but there’s a market for it, it goes on.”

“It’s not hand wringing.”

“You know, those almost kids, as you call them, come from impoverished families. This is a way out of poverty and, I’m not going to lie, they can’t all meet their knight in shining armour but some of them do get rescued.”

“Yeah, but...”

“What the fuck do you want to do about it?” said Smale, finger in Dan’s face.

“I want to know where that bloody dorm is. I need to get him out.”

“First you upset Von Eil, now you’re going after Mr Gip. I’ve got to hand it to you, but you’ve no idea what you’re getting involved in. You’re so outside your comfort zone it’s not even funny. They eat little boys like you for breakfast...”

“I’ve given up caring about my own safety. Look around, look at this bloody place for a start. We’re in the land that time forgot, there are no laws, but it doesn’t stop me trying. I wanna save Moi, the eighteen-year-old lad.”

“On a side note, thought you might be interested, Von Eil’s in town, Gip’s business partner, so double the trouble, need eyes in the back of your head. Probably here to discuss plans for their resort on Coconut Island, which is why they’re both also taking a big interest in this backpacker case. Bad for business. You know, no money, no honey.”

“No wonder they love me,” he said almost to himself.

“Yes, Mr Mike,” said a waitress, responding to Smale’s signal.

“A pen, please, my love,” he said, taking it from her, scribbling an address on a napkin, handing it to Dan. “That’s Ronnie’s address. French chap. Reckons he’s an antiques dealer, but it could all be an elaborate cover as he’s Mr Gip’s fixer. If anyone knows, he does. You didn’t hear this from me.”

“Thanks,” he said, giving it a cursory glance before pocketing it but computing exactly where it was, how long it would take to get there.

“You’re a brave boy. I think you could do well here. But, Dan, please be careful.”

“It’s not brave. I’ve seen brave, and this isn’t it. But I owe it to Moi.”

“Why?”

“I run over and killed someone back home. Not just someone, a teenage girl, Suzie. I can’t keep running away, I need to pay something back,” he said as he got up from the table, unsteadily navigating his way out of the restaurant through a mist of tears, hailing the first passing cab.

He slid into the backseat, jaunty, upcountry Thai folk music on the radio, like all the drivers seemed to prefer as it reminded them of their simpler lives in the rural northeast, he guessed but to Dan it was so at odds with his jittery mood, as

he balled his hands into fists. Pain stabbed at his stomach and he felt almost seasick amid the dizzying whirl of concrete and movement as far as the eye could see, Bangkok bubbling with life from the clogged pavements to the roads glinting with a metallic sea of cars, the massive billboards towering above selling everything from Pepsi to Lexus. The smell, the heat, the light permitted no refuge from the intensity, nor did the thoughts in his head urging him to run again.

“Sir, we’re here. Five-hundred baht,” said the driver, turning around and tapping him on the knee.

He rummaged in his pocket for the money, handed it over, nodding as he got out, offering up a smile, having basically been robbed, paid ten times the going rate. But Dan had got to his destination without being whisked off to some sleazy go-go bar and shaken down, while the cabbie had made his money for the day. That was life in Thailand, he thought, the need to revel in small victories, remembering the local epithet of “keeping a cool heart”, realising if he could stick to that principle, however hard, then he at least had a chance. Too many foreigners lost their hearts, then their heads in this country, it seemed only the snakes survived.

Looking at the expansive wooden house in front him, perfectly pitched behind lush foliage in a tropical garden with an adjacent tennis court was a fine example of who thrived, heart hammering in his chest, palms greasy from sweat, horribly metallic, dry taste in his mouth. He checked the napkin again to make sure it was the right place, but it all added up, though somehow it shouldn’t have, but Dan knew this is what selling sleaze bought in a city like Bangkok. He thought back to Moi, then looked at the elegant facade of the colonial-style house with its canopies and shutters, its sweeping terrace where expertly mixed G&Ts were no doubt served in the welcome shade of early evening.

“You arsehole,” he said, surveying the eight-foot-high locked gates, finally locating an intercom, depressing it.

He looked up at the gates again, wondering if he could

climb them, wondering whether his skinny, unconditioned frame could take them on when a pair of big dogs bounded over the manicured lawn. The rottweilers poked their noses through the railings, inches from his trouser leg as if they'd just been let out and were looking for an early dinner.

"Ronnie 'ere," a voice said finally over the barking dogs via a crackly speaker.

"Ronnie, listen, it's me, Dan."

"Dan... I don't know any Dan. I'm busy right now."

"No, look, Ronnie... Ron. I'm a friend of a friend. I need some help, and they said you were the man, that you could fix anything, anything at all," he said, being as vague but complimentary as possible, an old journalistic trick.

"But what do you want?"

"I've got a little something to discuss, a proposition for you."

"I hope you're not trying to sell me something. Everyone's got something to sell in this town and it's usually overpriced *merde*," he replied as the gates rattled open. "And don't mind the dogs. They don't bite unless they're 'ungry."

"They look angry."

"*Hungry*, not angry."

He chuckled to himself at the almost comedic French accent, but the laughter lodged in his constricted throat as the dogs formed a dervish of gnashing teeth around him, inhibiting his progress to the house every step of the way. Dan impatiently kicked out, sending one of the hounds skittering off to the side, though the other sank its teeth into his hand causing him to yell out in pain as he looked down at the blood leaking from an inch-long wound, staining the neatly clipped grass crimson.

"I said don't mind them. You shouldn't be kicking them," said Ronnie, standing at the door, furiously clapping his hands as the dogs slipped sleekly back into the house.

"So?" he said, holding up a bloody hand to the tall, skinny streak of piss lolling around in beachwear.

“So, what? I guess they took a disliking to you, but I can’t be too careful, you know. I take it this is not a social visit. You’ve not come for a game of tennis.”

“You think this is bloody funny?” he said, shaking a fist just in front of Ronnie’s protruding nose, shoulder barging him as he entered the shadowy, parquet floor lined hallway.

“Hey, hey, where you think you’re going?” he said, grabbing Dan roughly by the arm.

“Get your bloody hands off me,” he said, turning around, pushing Ronnie in the chest, sending him flailing backwards.

“Sir, sir, you okay?” said a young woman running into the hallway.

“No sweat, I can deal with this shit,” Ronnie said, having regained his balance, fast closing the space between him and Dan with big strides.

“I was at the Red Lantern last night. I saw how you treat those Thais. They should be at university, not rich men’s bloody playthings,” he said, leaping up at him, banging his fists on the Frenchman’s chest, but they simply bounced off.

“That’s the problem with people like you, you come ‘ere with all your ideas, your dreams but you don’t get it,” said Ronnie, eyes searing into Dan’s, wiry frame uncoiling with power, like they’d just been play fighting before, twisting his arm so hard it felt like it would snap in two, backing him against the wall, a wall hanging with exquisite works of art. “This place Bangkok is shiny on the outside but it’s a *toilette*, a cesspit. The meek shall inherit the Earth? *Non*, it’s the most corrupt.”

“You’re proud of it? You’re sick. *Moi*, he’s eighteen. Eighteen years old!” he screamed, aiming a fist at that nose, which bent with a sickening crack.

“Fuck,” he said, putting a hand up, the Gallic beak dripping blood.

“Come on,” said Dan, his fists raised, ready to go again, but the elbow slamming into his throat sent him flying into the wall, pain pulsing from the back of his head.

“You come into my ‘ouse and do this.”

Ronnie spat in his face as he was prone, backed up as far as he could go, massive hands around his neck, fingers tightening their grip, air pushed from his throat. A blackness around the periphery of his vision now as the pressure intensified, the pain in his head, through his whole body, and it was as if he was shrinking, collapsing in on himself, folding up into the wall.

“You fuck. Tell me why you think you should live?” said Ronnie, finally letting go, Dan bent double, greedily breathing in lungfuls of air.

“You’re bloody evil...”

“*Merde!* What do I have to do to get rid of you?”

“Then I’ll be on your conscience as well,” he said, standing up straight, them eye to eye again.

“Fuck you,” he said, face contorted, hands around Dan’s neck, though the knee to the groin sent Ronnie tumbling backwards, slipping on the parquet in his flip-flops.

“I killed someone. A young woman, same age as Moi. I was bloody drink driving. Maybe if I stayed at the scene and helped her, she would’ve lived. I’m a bloody coward,” he said, sliding down the wall, sprawling over the floor. “I can’t see another youngster’s life wasted. Not someone I can save.”

“You’re *ting tong*, as they say in Thai, crazy. A real *ting tong farang*. You barge in here like you’re not even scared, don’t know what you’re dealing with. It’s formidable.”

“I’m not scared. I’ve got nothing left to lose. But I’m taking it that’s a ‘yes’?”

“*Oui.*”

They’d reached a dilapidated apartment block, a gaggle of street dogs yapping outside, having gnawed through some rubbish bags, nosing at a mound of rotting, stinking food. Dan looked up at the flats, like something out of an old Hong Kong movie, the blackened facade, the bars up at the windows, washing poked out haphazardly at every conceivable angle as if to catch the sun’s rays but enveloped in gloom,

constant shadow. It was just yards from the serenity of the Frenchman's house with its parquet flooring and antiques, going from colonial splendour to slum in a Bangkok minute.

"What is this place?" he said as Ronnie fiddled with a large, rusted padlock.

"Welcome to the zoo," said the Frenchman, turning around and offering him a smile as they walked down a murky corridor, throwing open another door.

"Jesus," he said under his breath, air thick with cheap perfume, cigarettes but something horribly human too, sweat, like so many dirty bodies stacked up in one place, evident as his eyes became adjusted to the weak light filtered through the rags at the windows – a human battery farm, row after row, laid out on the hard floor.

"This is better than what they've come from. They have long nights, if you know what I mean, so they sleep late. Follow me," he said, moving towards a lad at the end of one of the rows, each in an almost identical bundle in the foetal position, and Ronnie shook him roughly.

"Ron?" he said bleary eyed but having bolted upright, flinching.

"It's all right, love," said Dan, bending down to his level, Moi's face grey, hair lank, eyes lifeless. "We've come to set you free."

But smiling at him elicited no response, the word "freedom" not meaning a thing as the lad stared out beyond him into nothingness.

"Get your things, we're going," said Ronnie, dragging him up, filling a carrier bag with a pitifully small pile of cheap clothes, though he looked hesitant, uncertain.

"Here," said Dan, as he stood, tears visible in otherwise dead eyes, pushing a big bundle of notes into Moi's hand.

The three of them exited the room, Ronnie hurrying him down the hallway. At the entrance, the lad finally looked at them both as if for the first time, but Dan pointed off into the distance.

“You go,” he said, again waving him off and Moi looked even more quizzical.

“Sometimes a bird has been kept in a cage so long, when you open the door they back further in,” said Ronnie.

As the young man walked uncertainly out into the street, past the withered dogs, Dan realised he was just a frightened animal himself being asked to leave his friends, four walls that were not only a prison but had become a home and he felt guilty all over again, guilty, useless, gutless like he'd been on the night of the so-called accident but what was accidental about it?

Chapter 15

The ringing of the phone slammed into his head, another rude awakening, eyes wide open now but wanting the escape of sleep to envelope him as soon as he saw the stains on the cheap tiled ceiling, remembering where he was, whole body throbbing with a hangover.

“Hello,” he croaked finally, putting his head face down in the pillow, trying to avoid the light hammering through the window colliding with him like a car crash.

“Dear boy, it’s me, Smale, listen I know you had a heavy night probably, Bangkok after all but there’s been a fire...”

“A fire? Aren’t there fires all the bloody time,” he said, sitting up, though only half paying attention, rapt at his reflection goggling back at him from the mirror above the bedside table.

“No, no, listen, it’s Sri Bumphen Apartments, massive inferno, black choking smoke, I passed there on the way to the office and remembered it’s your place...”

He cut the call, threw on a pair of shorts, T-shirt, tried Som’s number but it went straight to voicemail, looking at the lad next to him on the bed, the one whose name he didn’t even remember. So much for living his best life, being his authentic self, that’s where it got you, he thought, as he tottered into the bathroom, self-hate, guilt rising in his throat, knees bent, scrabbling around on the floor, puking in the bowl over and over.

Dan tried Som’s number again as he ran out of the room but got the same discombobulated voice, imagining her, Max, blackened corpses, unable to get the image out of his head as he hit the street. But he hadn’t imagined it, Smale’s sober voice, as round the corner in the direction of the apartment

was a pall of smoke, ash coating his face, settling on his white shirt like a harbinger of hell. Running towards the building, a throng of people outside came into view, faces lit up by the swirling red lights of the fire engines in attendance. Breaths exploded out of him as he battled through the bodies, it all felt surreal, like something from one of those disaster movies.

A fireman held him squirming in his arms, unable to go any further, looking up at the fifth floor, the one with the ugly blackened, charred exterior where the numerous hoses were trained but then his legs gave way, head in hands at the dawning realisation, though he didn't want to believe it, unable to look. He could hear his landlady's voice, feel a hand pawing at his arm but he couldn't take it in, all he knew was that he'd been looking directly at his, *their* apartment, the absolute epicentre. Hands shaking so much, vision blurred, he struggled to select Som's number, but he knew what was coming, heart thundering at the sound of voicemail.

His landlady in his face now, consoling hand on his shoulder, directing a cacophony of Thai at him but he didn't want to be a part of it anymore, couldn't face another tragedy and he simply brushed her off, turned away, staggered over to Wong's. He hammered on the metal shutters. The place was shut up tight since it was still early morning, though he knew the guvnor lived above the shop, as it were, was never one to turn down a thirsty customer. Dan rapped again, looking at his bleeding knuckles but not feeling a thing, needing that alcohol hit with a junkie's fervour, if only he could get it then he could bloody think straight. That was the theory, though he knew it never worked out in practice.

"What the fuck, Dan," said the bar owner, leaning out bleary-eyed, shirtless from an upstairs window.

"I need a drink. Badly," he said, thumbing over at Sri Bumphen.

He didn't say a word, shaking his head as he gently closed the window. In the time it took Dan to light a fag, the bar owner had rattled open the shutters, hugged him inside. The

governor poured his drink in silence. He swigged back the whisky, banged the glass down where it was immediately refilled. Then another and another.

Blearily looking at the clock frozen in time, Dan wished that was the case, wished with all his being. Turning the clock back would be even better as he wouldn't have left Som and Max. This wouldn't have bloody happened, he thought, slamming a fist down into the arm of the chair, the bar owner giving him a concerned look, though he simply shook his head. Lerm hadn't been around last night, was "seeing a friend" and he'd ended up at the Paradise but maybe Mr Gip had assumed he was still living at Sri Bumphen.

Trembling now, rocking back and forth, he remembered that blase discussion with Ronnie where he said he wasn't scared but who the fuck was he trying to kid? He just couldn't understand how far wrong he'd gone, like he stepped through the looking glass, down the rabbit hole into a world where he didn't know the rules, if there actually were any. A world where someone was willing to fry him alive, had burnt Som and Max, his wife and child, to death. Dan closed his eyes, but all he could see was Max, and he couldn't stand it, striding behind the bar, edging the governor out of the way, unscrewing the cap of the whisky bottle, putting it to his lips and throwing his head back.

Feeling the phone vibrating in his pocket, through his brain fog he debated whether to answer or not but then pulled it out, putting the mobile to his ear. Words as though silken, embossed in gold, filling his head.

"It's me, Som," she said. "My phone died. What do you want?"

"Som, where the bloody hell are you? Where's Max?"

"Oh, so you're finally interested in our welfare..."

"There was a fire, a fire at our flat, Sri Bumphen. Where's Max?"

"A fire? Oh, my God. This better not be anything to damn well do with you and the company you keep."

“Som! Where’s Max?!” he screamed.

“Oh, the concerned dad. Look, I’m at Mum’s in Hua Hin, Max is standing next to me wondering where his Daddy’s staying tonight. But thanks again for your concern, and I hope you lavish some of that rainy day money on your boyfriend of yours. Arsehole.”

He listened to the silence that followed the tirade, but her words were imprinted behind his eyes in big capital letters over and over like he was reading them off an autocue, and he threw his phone across the bar. Dan swallowed the remainder of the whisky, caught a glimpse out the window of their old apartment, just a sad, empty shell like his marriage, his life and he knew despite all the bravado of yesterday, this morning was a sign and he had to run again, like the coward he was. Ladies and gentlemen, Dan Young had returned to type.

The call had been as unexpected as it was unwelcome, like an intrusion, he thought as he stumbled along the pavement abutting the traffic-choked road, the main thoroughfare out of the city via the river. He hadn’t known what to expect when he heard the Yank’s voice on the end of the line, certainly not a lunch date at The Oriental, but the New Jersey menace had become all Upper East Side charm, what was a girl to do. Smale had filled him in on the fact that the New Yorker had been a banker on Wall Street before falling foul of fraud charges and decamping to Thailand. That figured, as Dan sensed he could probably sell ice to the Eskimos given he was all nasally charm until you stepped on his toes.

He needed the walk to clear his head, perpetual motion, still brushing at his shirt, ash indelibly there from the fire. Dan scanned the street one way then the other, paranoid he was being followed, but the pavements were devoid of people in the baking Bangkok sun, he was only accompanied by his shadow, save for the odd beggar that occasionally reared up

from a piss-stinking doorway. Trundling along a small battered holdall of his remaining worldly goods, he imagined Von Eil viewing everything so differently, hands sidling over a pigskin leather steering wheel, looking out of a tinted wind-screen, loafers planted in a shagpile mat.

Standing at the pier on the oily Chao Phraya now, waiting for the one-star public boat to shuttle him ungraciously to his five-star date, he looked around at the other would-be passengers milling about – there were the locals, dressed in the usual approximation of office wear the world over, shirts and slacks, though all the Westerners seemed in holiday mode, shirt sleeve order, shorts and flip-flops, many toting cameras around and oversized water bottles as if they were going on safari. Dan looked at their easy interactions, the way the laughter bubbled up so effortlessly, stamping a foot down, turning away.

Entering the hotel lobby as his eyes adjusted to the atmospherically lit, cool space, after the dazzling brightness of outside, he took in the marble, the dark wood, the potted palms, whirring ceiling fans, the gentle tinkling of a piano on the air, sighing gently, feeling of 1930s languor infectious. A bellboy in a starched white uniform immediately caught his eye, glided over and Dan mentioned who he was here to see. The absurdly attractive young man looped an arm seamlessly through his as he guided him onto a veranda, discreetly pointing him towards the American with a smile, as if he'd been given the keys to the city.

“Hey, man,” said Von Eil, embracing him but instinctively brushing down his suit jacket, then holding him at arm's length as if some long-lost friend.

He refused to sit, instead placing his sticky palms on the table, right in the Yank's face, nose to nose, could taste what he had for breakfast. “Do you know my flat was burnt to the ground? I've just come from there. It's like the towering bloody inferno. My wife and kid...”

“You're causing a scene. This is a pleasant place and

you're stinking out the joint. Sit!"

"My wife and kid could've died," he said, bashing a fist into the table, Von Eil's coffee cup rattling in its bone china saucer but his face impassive, imploring eyes causing Dan to slide resignedly into a chair.

"Good man. Take it easy. Deep breaths, dude. Yoga, do it every damn day before sunrise. Anyway, I think you mean soon to be ex-wife, but I heard you had a rough morning. Anyone would think you're cursed. You know they believe in bad spirits here, right," he said, waving over a waiter.

"What do you know about it?" he said, sitting on his haunches, body tensed.

"What have I told you about asking questions? It just gets you in all sorts of heat. Heat, geddit."

"I don't need to listen to this," he said, getting up to leave, but Von Eil had his forearm in such a firm grip it caused him to slump back in his wicker chair.

"You're a great guy, Limey. Like the very best of Englishmen, do your Queen proud, complete gent, but you're causing me and my business partner, who I think you recently had the pleasure of meeting, a problem. Houston, we have a situation. Coconut Island's all over Facebook, your freaking page in particular, and Coca Bananas seems a prime target for this libel. Do you know how bad that is for business?"

"I'm looking for the truth, that is, who killed Bill and Corrine."

"You're looking for the truth, while my profits are going south. We already have our suspects. Let the authorities do their thing."

"What's this *we*? Sounds like it's a joint bloody enterprise," said Dan, two martinis having been placed in front of them, the Yank raising a glass but he slid his away.

"Man, I swear, you just don't get it, but the clue phone's ringing off the damn hook. You're like one of those cockroaches that scuttles around Coco Bananas, every time I stamp my heel on one somehow it gets away, lives to bug me

again but you know what, I get it eventually, I crush its shell until there's a big fat zero, nothing, nada."

Dan took two gulps of the martini, not yet eleven o'clock in the morning, his knees knocking under the table, caught in the Yank's glare, though behind the eyes there just appeared a blank, a scarily empty void and he instinctively patted at his pocket, felt the knife, so wanting to use it as they were shrouded in silence, kept his hand there, prone.

"What do you want from me?" he said at last, knowing it was surrender but that he didn't have a choice, draining the rest of his drink, Von Eil having finally wrested his gaze away from him, towards the river.

"I hope you brought your boxers. I'm going to drive you to the bus station now, and you're going to leave this country. For damn good, you get me, capiche? The state of it, too. Look at yourself, in this magnificent hotel, and you're a hobo."

The American scraped his chair backwards and he followed suit, Von Eil throwing an arm round his shoulders forcing him to breathe in the expensive cologne, the decadent whiff of cigar as he guided him smilingly across the veranda, nodding to other guests like he was some kind of Hollywood royalty at a film premiere with his glamorous plus one. Outside the reception the valet was already waiting obediently with keys in hand, Dan's heart hammering in his chest as he was standing next to a sleek black Merc but as he looked at the other vehicles in the car park they were almost identikit, an accoutrement of the city's rich and he tried to discount the thought from his head. It wasn't the American Lerm had leaned in and kissed the other day. It couldn't have been.

Chapter 16

He ended up where they all ended up eventually, the desperate farangtinos of Bangkok, queuing to get into the dusty Cambodian border town of Poipet. It was usually where foreigners without work permits – about 99.9% of the diaspora – went with the regularity of a bad habit to extend their tourist visas, just a bureaucratic transaction, always oiled by a few extra baht slipped in between the covers of the passport. The backhander usually assured there were no questions asked, and the process took half an hour at most. Yet Dan eyed the Thai immigration official eyeing him, receiving an exit stamp with a clunk, like the sound of a gunshot, and it all felt brutally final, like he'd lost something, well, not something, everything. Thailand had begun to seem like home, and while Som and Max were estranged, it'd been comforting to know they weren't far away, Lerm's embrace was the only thing that helped him sleep at night recently, and now what did he have? Even the rainy day money, the last refuge, had gone.

His mouth was parched, a body with a life of its own that he couldn't stop trembling, constantly wired into a wavelength always on, shaking his head at this one-way ticket to the Third World gutter. He'd remembered some of the veteran journalists at the Daily, the old Asia hands, talking in hushed tones, the usual cliché like Cambodia was the Thailand of "twenty years ago" but one hack put it all into perspective when he said the "whores are cheaper and so is the beer". That was the bloody yardstick and as he crunched through the dirt to the Cambodian side, batting away the black swarm of flies persistently buzzing in his face, the boiling army of bluebottles was like a reminder of the way Bill's blackened head wound had crawled with them, memory

piercing through everything else that happened since, clear as the waters of Coconut bloody Island, as the guilt gripped him, the fact he'd abandoned the backpackers, the Thai fishermen. Pathetically, he was running again, like he always did.

He gripped tighter to the battered holdall as he approached immigration, a lopsided sentry box, officer swaddled in a starchy green uniform, slick of sweat on his top lip, heat of the day battering down. The Cambodian was young, baby faced, though that changed on seeing the passport, features twisted as he looked quizzically from the photo image of Dan and back to the real thing, several times, like he was stalling for something, weren't they bugging all.

"You're tourist?" he said, eyebrow raised.

"Yeah."

And he folded his arms, ready for a long wait Asia style, though his eyes soon settled on the large gun in a holster on the officer's hip, someone that didn't even really look old enough to drive but then he remembered hearing some of the Khmer Rouge had been just kids, easier to mould, less of a conscience when they pulled the trigger. He might as well be in the wild bloody west. Dan laughed bitterly under his breath, stung by the irony of the fact he'd been hounded out of Thailand, yet Cambodia wasn't keen either, cursing that he'd neglected the old money in the passport trick.

"How much do you want?" he said finally, rubbing together thumb and forefinger, the international language, sensing the queue behind him becoming restless in the heat.

"Office," he said, handing back the passport unstamped, pointing to what looked more like a shed with the ubiquitous corrugated iron roof.

As he entered, an older man lasered in on him like he was eyeing prey, though he soon leaned back laconically behind a messy desk, cigarette on, chair squeaking under his considerable weight, dulled brass buttons of his grimy uniform straining at a sizeable gut.

"Ten-thousand baht."

He said it so quietly, eyes barely meeting Dan's, that he was about to ask him to repeat himself, disbelieving at how utterly brazen it was, though quivering inside at the fact it seemed his card was marked, that his name was on some kind of list, which meant he was ripe for shaking down. Far from leaving an invisible trace having gone on the run, it was like there was always someone right behind him, breathing down his neck.

"Five thousand," he said, going for the dwindling sheaf of notes in his pocket, sweat pulsing from his armpits.

"Six."

The officer now had him in an unwavering stare, a supercilious smile on his face like he'd won. They always did, jackboot never failing. Dan counted out six crisp one-thousand baht notes, calculating his stash had taken yet another hit, laid them on the counter, closing his eyes as he listened for the welcome thud of the passport stamp. Without another word, he pocketed the freshly minted travel document, lighting up as he exited the office, passing the sentry post, finally able to look behind him but there were only a few flacid faced *farang* loitering, along with the usual backpackers earnestly fanning themselves with Lonely Planets and some raggedy looking locals in beaten up shoes and billowy shirts. He huffed out a large cloud of smoke, tension easing from his shoulders, the relief he was no longer hunted flooding through him. Maybe running was the only solution.

Not far in the distance he spotted a car park crudely laid out in the dustbowl, various buses in varying states of disrepair sitting askew, garish paint unable to hide the rust, the dilapidation, so much lipstick on a pig, touts desperately calling out destinations, needing business.

"Where you go," said a girl, blocking his path with skeletal-like arms, smile revealing crooked, blackened teeth.

He shook his head. This girl, no more than twelve, lipstick shakily applied as if with crayon, clothes like rags hanging off her, probably supplied by some well-meaning Western

charity but Dan sensed she was touting for custom. Pressing money into her hand, a hand that didn't want to let go, until he shooed her away, was the time it took for relief to morph into despair about the position he was in, where he was, as he headed for the bus straining at its haunches, the one advertising Phnom Penh.

He hadn't slept well, the lumpy bed in the flophouse hardly conducive, though the weird screams in the middle of the night made it feel more asylum than hotel, guessing it was some Western druggie who'd tuned in and dropped out in a town infamous for it. The strip light hummed above him, the fly he hadn't been able to kill still buzzing away maddeningly in the corner of the rabbit hutch of a room, bringing to mind his pathetic, uncoordinated attempts at swotting it in the midst of another alcoholic fog last night. But checking his phone, he was relieved it was nine o'clock, morning, though looking at the dirty sheets, walls slick with mould, his stomach constricted, forcing him to double up on the bed, disbelieving at what it had come to.

Walking out into the Phnom Penh morning, even though people were milling about, there was a disconnection, a lack of dynamism, an end of days feel only heightened by the crumbling buildings, the battered cars, the desperate looks thrown his way as though he had money, like he bloody cared. Unsteady on the rutted pavement, Dan shook his head, because if Thailand had initially felt like a refuge, this place was the end of the road. Along with the cheap hookers, he'd heard how easy it was to get heroin, as though that was some kind of draw, the only economy a black one.

It didn't feel like rush hour, no smartly dressed men and women with places to be, instead a strange kind of soporific air pervaded, motorbike taxi drivers laid flat asleep on their saddles, cats curled up in the shadows out of the glare of the

sun, yet he wanted perpetual motion, distraction, this was too bugging quiet. Flashing into his head came Som, Max, the fishermen, Bill and Corrine. He thought back to the blaze, not the first time he'd nearly been killed over the last few days, shuddering as it was like they were getting closer. Maybe running was all he was good at, though it just accentuated the feeling of inadequacy, cowardice. That's right, he was a bloody coward, which is why he'd got married to Som, which was why he'd scarpered the minute a man said he loved him, chickened out of discovering what it actually meant, abdicated his responsibility in terms of the backpackers when he was probably the only person that cared.

The single answer left to several questions was booze, he thought, sitting down on the veranda of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Cambodia, never having felt more of a fake, given the old heave-ho from that rag the Bangkok Daily, so what kind of correspondent did that make him? He ordered a beer, looked out at the only pleasing view of the city he'd seen so far, the Tonle Sap river glinting in the morning sun, people promenading lazily down its banks like they'd lost something, thinking many of them probably had. The Khmer Rouge and their genocide may have been long gone, but there was an aura; he'd heard it called a land of ghosts, and he could feel it, like he felt the bad spirits on that beach at Coconut Island. Shivers ran up his arms despite the almost suffocating heat, the place feeling ripe as though about to burst, and he cracked open his breakfast Beer Laos, swigging it back like it was the elixir of life, drinking like there was no tomorrow.

A jolt went through him and pierced the morning languor, as despite the near empty bar, a man came and sat at a table directly opposite. Not only did the thickset Asian with swept back hair and immaculate dark suit seem completely out of place. He also brought back snatched memories of last night, of having been approached by an almost identical, well-dressed man in a bar, sure he hadn't dreamt it despite being in

an alcoholic haze at the time. He leant forward and tried to get the man's attention, desperate to rekindle his memory, but the Asian plunged his hand into his pocket, got out his phone, began fiddling with it. Obviously not the same person, he thought, finally easing back in his chair. But as he drained the remainder of his beer, he casually looked up to see the man eyeing him before clumsily returning to his screen, Dan's mouth going dry. He booted up FB to distract himself. The flood of messages had turned to a trickle, and he breathed out, though Thai_truthseeker had posted again: "You don't have long to save the fishermen. The hangman's noose is tightening; the clock is ticking. Why don't you come talk to me?"

Biting his nails, lighting up yet another ciggie to stop him destroying them even further, he wondered whether the poster did actually know something because he'd never felt so far removed from what he'd pledged that day in the tumbledown temple under Peeklong's terrible gaze. It was like he could smell the decomposing bodies now, setting him swaying, Dan holding onto the table with white knuckles as though about to slide onto the floor, Asian man's stare suddenly burning into him, as if he'd been waiting for a moment of weakness. He closed his eyes, counted to ten, just like the therapist had taught him in the wake of the accident, hoping the man would've gone when he reopened them, wishing the world would look completely different, familiar. It didn't but he'd stopped staring and was busy paying his bill. Dan breathed out as he looked at Lerm's latest text, the lad having set him up with a so-called business associate who could accommodate him for a few days. He needed freebies, not really having a choice, but it would almost be like losing the cloak of invisibility in this place, no longer a nobody, Bangkok following him around, becoming Dan Young again. He sensed this was Lerm's bloody way of keeping an eye on him, that insurance he was talking about on account of whose dollar he was spending.

“Tony, Tony O’Reilly, but just call me Tony. Welcome to Disneyland.”

“Hi, Dan,” he said, shaking the hand of the bear of a man in front of him. The ridiculously bushy hipster beard, the jocular Irish accent, the odd comment, obscure Tony Blair reference all unsettled him.

“Chalerm told me all about you. Sounds like you had a rough time of it. Time to let your hair down. Journalist, right?”

“Bangkok Daily,” he said above the throb of voices, the chichi rooftop jammed, some people huddled tightly in groups, others lolloping on oversized cushions that were scattered across the floor, the whole scene framed by ornate railings strewn with fairy lights.

“Journalists and NGOs, hmmm,” said O’Reilly, alternately weighing one hand above the other. “Not to worry, I won’t say anything incriminating. Just here for the craic. Weekly gathering of the country’s finest charity workers. All good, clean fun, Danny Boy.”

“What do you actually do?”

“Ah, my boy, you know the rules, but as you’re a hack, I’ll let you off. I help clean bat droppings off the country’s monuments. I’m knee deep in poop, chief shit shoveller.”

He was expecting the punchline to some self-deprecating joke that never came, instead looking on as the Irishman brought a martini glass to his lips, followed by a self-satisfied smile like he was some superior being, similar expressions on the faces of other guests and he felt dizzy with it all, totally discombobulated. Here was a country absolutely on its knees, desperate, dirt-poor people yet the likes of O’Reilly were living it up in an ivory tower replete with cocktail waiters and fairy lights, earning a packet for cleaning up dung.

“You okay, fella? You look a little pale, milk bottle white as my old ma used to say.”

“You’ll have to excuse me,” said Dan, bolting for the stairs, elbowing the crush of people aside as he did so.

His footsteps thundered down the wooden stairwell in time to his heart. The cloying voices of the party had receded, but he was convulsing, body involuntarily jerking as he banged through a set of double doors onto the pavement. Breaths finally stilling, managing to steady himself, he looked up, fairy lights draped artfully over the railings, bougainvillea spilling down, like some exclusive bar but on street level he could smell the sewers, a pack of dogs sniffing and snarling around him, trishaw driver coiled in the shadows. He hurriedly crossed the road, mutts thankfully losing interest, though he jumped as a rat that had been gnawing at a stinking pile of rubbish ran across his path, following with his eyes as the rodent slid its greasy body Houdini like through a drain cover and he shivered.

Other side of the street now, along the promenade he'd viewed this morning from the bar, the little ornate lampposts lit up, though offering only the vaguest sliver of light, so dark the pitted, uneven paving slabs frequently sent him tripping. But he was in a hurry, uncoordinated, the panic hitting him at the party out of nowhere, and he'd had to leave. It was just being around all that privilege only made him feel guilty, like a fraud.

Breathing out, he lit up a fag, but he sensed the swooshing above, the air as if disturbed, and looking up, bats were all a swirl. He wondered whether that was why the promenade was so empty compared to the daytime, so quiet, except for the weird sound of the atmosphere above being displaced by veiny wings. Dan didn't believe in omens, or hadn't, until Coconut Island, but was now attuned to any slight change in the ether, noticing the breeze around him picking up and the unmistakable clack, clack, clack of footsteps.

He stopped still, looked back, and a tingle went through him. Just metres away, as though out of nowhere, he was sure it was the stocky Asian from this morning, and he was closing fast, eyes blank, face expressionless. Dan ran, blood pulsing in his temples, lungs already burning, staring straight into the

distance, darkness going up a notch, breeze a tad cooler, heading out of town, instinct telling him he had to get away. But the footsteps were getting louder, pounding behind him, and he glanced back again, a metallic flash, a knife in the man's outstretched hand.

Dan zig-zagged from the promenade into the road, vision blurred as he frantically swiped the sweat oozing from his forehead, though he kept running, no choice, breaths rasping, panicked in his ears, sensing his pace slowing, footfalls from behind booming. Rounding a corner, swaying, legs buckling but dazzling lights, a taxi sign, a bloody taxi! It slowed to a halt right in front of him, and Dan grabbed at the door handle, bundled into the front seat, slapped the driver manically on the shoulder and pointed straight ahead. They lurched forward as the Asian just managed to throw himself clear of the bonnet, though those staring, opaque eyes speared into him and all he could do was wrench his head away.

The taxi dropped him outside the party, which was only a few hundred metres away from where he'd got in, and the driver had scowled at him until Dan shoved a bunch of notes in his hand. Asia, the place where moolah always ensured no questions were asked. But he had questions, loads of them, watching as the red taillights of the taxi receded, feeling alone but hunted, which had to be the most fucked up predicament in the world. He scanned the street, one way, then the other, paranoid the Asian man would soon emerge out of the gloom, revisiting the scrambled images in his head, now unsure whether there'd been a knife but he was definitely being chased, wasn't he? He wasn't even convinced it'd been his admirer from the Foreign Correspondents' Club, or the bloke who'd buttonholed him last night and he looked up at the villa, could hear the thrum of the party like some kind of come-on and despite not being in the mood he couldn't face

another grim hotel room, he almost needed people, light. If he was surrounded by others, then surely he was safe. That was the theory.

“Oh, Danny Boy. Thought you’d met someone and done a bunk. You know, get your coat, you’ve pulled, type thing. Lerm did say you were a bit of a lad,” said O’Reilly.

“I was gonna give this another go, but you know what, I’ve had a long day. Maybe you can drop me back at your place and come back out. Too much of a good thing and all that,” he said, realising his knuckles were white he was holding his beer so tight, Tony’s eyes looking as wild as his beard, probably something to do with the large spliff he was waving around.

“Did something happen to you back there? You still look white as a ghost, my man. Take a toke.”

“No, you’re all right.”

“You wee Englishman, you’re all so bollocking straight, Jesus. I tell you what...”

“That man, the one in the suit, that’s bloody him, he was chasing me just now, with a knife,” he said, pointing a trembly finger, the Asian looking back with a vacant smile, appearing as immaculate and unruffled as ever, though he thought he saw a look pass between him and Tony.

“Unless he’s got a body double, I doubt it. He’s been here the entire time. Works for Unicef but come on, let’s get you home, lightweight.”

“You know him?” he said, grabbing the Irishman’s arm.

“Seen him around, small town. Chill the fuck out, okay?”

It was Tony’s turn to grab his arm, notably about-turning him in the opposite direction to where the Asian was standing, manhandling him down the stairs, bundling him into a waiting trishaw, babbling something at the driver. They took off through the shadowy city, Dan relenting and hungrily knocking back the spliff, not wanting to think about what came next, not wanting to think full stop. Yet, looking at the bats swooping down in the dimness of the streetlights, wings

chopping through the air, breeze rustling the palm trees, churning brown river just beyond it, caused a familiar sense of dread to grip him, Asia one big bloody ghost story.

His ears still buzzed with the sound of the party, but in the trishaw was only silence, like Tony was deliberately trying to unnerve him, despite the fact Lerm had set them up. Then again, the Irishman could just be high, while Dan realised pot always made him paranoid, which was never a good place to be, especially as he felt completely lost, totally reliant on a supposed friend of a friend.

“Home sweet home,” said Tony as they finally pulled up outside what looked like a rambling villa.

“This looks amazing.”

“Just a little place the NGO rented for me. Used to be Comrade Duch’s pad, the torturer of S21.”

He looked at Tony’s face illuminated by the exterior lamp, but he wasn’t giving anything away, no indication of whether he was bloody joking or not, knowing S21 was where the supposed enemies of the Khmer Rouge were tortured, though that included various threats to society like teachers, those who wore glasses and of course, babies. The wondrous jackboot again. O’Reilly led him inside, propelling him through various darkened rooms, the place echoey, empty, feeling dusty, unloved, hardly a home, large gaps on walls where pictures had hung, yawning spaces where surely furniture should be. They came to a large stairwell and stopped.

“You’re tired, right? Guest room’s first one on the left. Has an en suite. Don’t worry if you hear banging, it’s just the resident spirits. I’m gonna fix myself a nightcap. See you in the morning. Sweet dreams. Don’t let the bedbugs bite.”

With that, he turned and disappeared off into the bowels of the house, Dan’s heart thrashing with the receding footsteps, but he began to climb the stairs and then stopped, jumping as he heard a door slam somewhere far off. His mouth had gone desert dry, passing a tongue over cracked lips knowing something didn’t feel right, unsure whether it was the drugs, Tony

or the haunted buggering house. He tiptoed back down the stairs, flinching at every creak, breaking into a little run on re-entering the hallway, straight out the front door, which he closed with a quiet click, hands leaving a slick of sweat on the handle.

Quickly scouting around outside, he had his hiding place, a bougainvillea bush opposite the front door, knowing if he wanted some kind of answer he had to utilise the patience Southeast Asians were so fond of, needed to keep a cool heart. Enveloped by the bush, finally feeling invisible, he lit a cigarette and waited. He looked up at the house from time to time, but it gave nothing away. The lamp still burned, but the shutters up at the numerous windows meant everything else was shrouded in darkness.

Remembering the trishaw ride had taken some time, it was almost like this place was in the middle of nowhere, at least far from the city, all eerily quiet, just the natter of the night-time wildlife, the buzzing of mosquitoes he frequently had to bat away. But then he heard it, the rumble of a car engine and he cocked his head, it was coming closer and closer and he peered out of the bush, headlights now, coming down the drive, taxi pulling up outside the door. His heart began fluttering, a film of sweat coating his face, ducking down as the man in the immaculate suit, the burly Asian, scanned left, then right before heading for the front door, it opening as if on cue. Tony stepped out, embracing him like a long-lost friend as they disappeared inside, the door closing with a whisper.

“Shit,” he said, gravel crunching underfoot as he sprinted down the driveway, sound masked by the departing cab, breaths burning, knowing he didn’t have long, not much of a head start.

He turned right at the end of the drive, feeling instinctively it went deeper into the countryside, with the other way the route back into the city, the one Dan was sure Tony and his companion would guess he’d take, the dipshits.

Chapter 17

The ring of the phone made him jump, looking up at another stained ceiling, surveying another dilapidated room, the yellowing walls the same colour as the sheets, and he tried to compute the unknown number, fearing they'd tracked him down, cutting the call. He trembled on the edge of the bed, though surely O'Reilly and the Asian weren't that bloody switched on. Dan breathed out, knowing he had to be rational, having chosen somewhere suitably anonymous in the maze of streets in the backpacker district of Phnom Penh after having to flag down a taxi on the deserted outskirts of the city last night. Despite the blare of traditional music coming from his sound system, the cabbie had been curious, chatty, practising his English, trying to get on in a country where making ends meet seemed a daily grind, everyone looking for an angle but Mr Taxi also suggested the seaside town of Sihanoukville when he'd said he wanted to "lie low" for a bit. Accessible from Phnom Penh by bus, it sounded suitably random and cheap, probably way beneath somewhere the bearded Irishman would think of looking. Fleeing the country was too obvious. Running was always his natural instinct, though Dan knew if he could go under the radar for a couple of days, he might just get his head straight. But he was shaking as he quickly threw the dwindling, pathetic bundle of his remaining possessions into the holdall amid the insistent ringing of the mobile again, needing to know.

"Dan, is that Dan Young?" said a woman's voice, a trembly *farang* woman's voice that seemed very far away.

"Who wants to know?"

"I'm Debbie, Debs, Bill's mum. You know Bill..."

"I'm so sorry. But I don't think I can help you," he said,

wringing his hands, pacing around.

“Listen, love, please, no one cares about my boy. My poor boy! I got your contact details from your byline in the Bangkok Daily. I saw your early reports on the case, the Facebook stuff. I’m in Thailand with a delegation of police officers from England as this case hasn’t been investigated properly. The story being spewed out by most of the papers, it’s just, it’s all so unfair. I need to talk to you, like properly talk, face to face.”

She trailed off, silence filling the line, words catching in his throat, an avalanche of things to say but nothing coming out, wishing she’d just go away, that they’d all go away, tempted to just ring off, give up.

“You there? Look, I don’t know who else to turn to. You seem to care. Bill and Corrine weren’t an item, so nothing adds up. That stuff about them making out and then the fishermen assaulting them both. He’s gay, my son, but I loved that boy so, so much.”

“I’m not in Thailand. I’m in Cambodia now,” he said, her words ringing in his head, whole body tingling, the fact Bill was gay seeming to add another layer of guilt. “Can you meet me here?”

“I’ve come all this way. I’d go to the ends of the Earth for Bill, you know he was so...”

Dan listened to the sobbing, wanting to say something, but nothing would come, like what the fuck could you say.

“Sorry, look, don’t mind me, it just gets to me, but course I can meet you, love. Send me your coordinates. I saw from your reports, hear from your voice you’re genuine,” Debs continued.

Unable to speak, quaking, he cut the call, but her words hung there, and he shook his head because he knew whichever way he ran he wouldn’t be able to rid himself of them.

The cab wound through the city, though city was a bit of a misnomer. Phnom Penh was just a concrete sprawl, with the jungle still encroaching in places, like while it may be a step ahead of nature, it was only just. He sensed the kickbacks he'd heard made to politicians hadn't helped, with no real urban planning, development all about who could buy off the right official to get their vision built. Looking out the window, he was also scouring the landscape for the likes of O'Reilly or the Asian, teeth chattering at the prospect, though he guessed they'd think him long gone, coward that he was. But there was one last thing he had to do before ungraciously doing a bunk, intent on at least a smidgen of karmic payback, thinking maybe he could calm those restless spirits so obviously afoot, even though a clock was ticking down in his head, needing to be as far from the city as possible.

The taxi pulled up outside a series of buildings with what looked like a playground out front studded with palm trees, bougainvillea spilling over whitewashed walls, though the suburban spell was broken by a sign chillingly announcing S21, the school commandeered by the Khmer Rouge as a torture chamber. Dan shuffled tentatively into the grounds with a gaggle of other tourists. A heavy silence enveloped the place, commentary next to the images of victims detailing their agonising punishment as though making any other words unnecessary. But commentary wasn't really needed – the indelible bloodstains on the floor, the rusted bedsteads with shackles attached, the row upon row of thumbnail photos of the too numerous prisoners in what looked like their Sunday best and all diligently recorded by their torturers – said more than enough. Worse still, the whole sick enterprise had been masterminded by Comrade Duch, a former owner of the house where O'Reilly was doing his bloody lord of the manor impression.

“The men, the women, the children had all been headed for one fate, bodies crammed in together like cattle in trucks, lives wiped out at the end of a gun barrel, babies slammed

against trees to save on bullets, body piled upon body in the Killing Fields,” he read, eyes misting as he walked from one horror to the next.

Reaching the exit, he finally breathed out, grabbed for his handkerchief, realising he was sticky with sweat, sticky and stinking, the genocide museum having even numbed him to the fiery heat of a Cambodian afternoon. His hand gently shook as he dabbed at himself, knowing the fleeting picture postcard Phnom Penh was all just an illusion, like the smoke and mirrors of Thailand.

He sat in a little garden cafe that was just across the road, but with its tropical trees all a riot of colour and its dainty tables and chairs, it felt like a different world. Dan reclined, grateful for the shade, the gentle breeze, thankful that he could simply walk away, run in this case.

“Mind if I sit?” said a middle-aged Cambodian sitting opposite, anyway. “Most foreigners don’t come here. Look at me, I’m a guide with no one to guide. Yeah, Westerners and Cambodia, it’s all an amusement park to them. All they hear is ‘one dollar, sir, one dollar’. They pay up and shut their eyes or expect others to keep them closed.”

“I know,” he said, sipping his ice-cold tea, smiling inside, realising he’d made the right decision after all.

“Look at those photos in S21. They were people who didn’t fit in. They didn’t do what the Khmer Rouge wanted. They were teachers, lawyers, doctors, they didn’t want to just work in the fields like Pol Pot wanted.”

“He was evil. Like any dictator...”

“Yes, yes, he was. But what I’m trying to say is they didn’t fit into society. We’re lucky now, so lucky. You might not think you fit in, cowering in a corner here, but nowadays we can be anything. We can actually be who we are. Pol Pot’s just in your head, your mind.”

He looked away from the man’s gaze, not wanting to engage anymore, but it was yet another reminder he was still denying who and what he really was.

The bus trip had been sweaty and long but thankfully uneventful. He'd been sitting next to a backpacker but tuned out to his naive wonderment about Southeast Asia, which basically centred on the availability of whores and dirt-cheap food. Dan always thought it odd that people were so easily duped, as it wasn't like the girls genuinely found *farang* attractive on the whole, mostly just a transaction, while Third World sanitation ensured that wonderful chow came with a side helping of tummy trouble. He felt like an old, jaded hand next to these twenty-somethings seeing the world, and while in years he wasn't much older, his experiences, especially in the last few months, had bloody aged him.

The usual touts swarmed around the bus as he got off, and amid the press of people, he flinched, realising he was still on the lookout for O'Reilly, the immaculately dressed Asian, but then shook his head with relief. He didn't need to worry about any of that now, he thought, as a young Cambodian woman grabbed his arm, waving a placard in his face proclaiming, "Nice Bungalow".

"How much?"

"Ten dollar per night."

He looked around at the melee as other touts were deep into their desperate patter, then at the grease-slicked bus station, the need to get away as quickly as possible pressing, the thought of a "nice" bungalow on a white sand beach never more appealing. He nodded, tired of talking, his chatter seeming to constantly get him in trouble, while the woman looped an arm through his as if to ensure she wouldn't lose her prize. The silence deepened as she deposited him in a nearby truck and they took off, though like always in Asia the contemplative quiet didn't last long as she turned on the stereo, techno booming from the speakers, shaking the cab and the girl offered him a cheeky little smile. Poker faced, he sat staring ahead, not wanting to return the favour because he didn't

want any more hassle, no more questions, needing that cloak of invisibility again, desiring anonymity.

Like most of Cambodia, he could see the beach town of Sihanoukville wasn't aesthetically pleasing. Rather, it seemed something of a goldrush town after many of the prospectors had given up on it. He'd heard it had once been a place of mangrove forests and swamps, but the concrete jungle attested to the way money talked, though numerous unfinished towers were like so many jagged, discoloured teeth blighting the skyline, blotting out the sun. The wide highways, the down at heel people couldn't disguise the desperation even in his comfortable seat behind a tinted windscreen.

His issue with the region ever since he'd arrived was the extremes, but again experience taught him those shining glass towers of Bangkok and the like were pretty much illusory. If you looked close enough, and it didn't take a lot, at ground level were the legless beggars, the slums thrown together with corrugated iron, the skeletal-like kids that barely had enough to eat. Gliding through all of this like ghosts were often the gilded expats on packages able to run at the first hint of trouble and have their worldly goods crated up and sent back with them, which was the cruellest irony for Dan since he was constantly on the outside looking in. With the panorama of the Third World unfolding yet again from his seat, he felt as though he was there again, almost at the bottom of the heap, heading for a tenner a night beach bungalow with no air con and a cold shower. He knew not much separated him from begging, and as the girl in the driver's seat gave him an odd sideways glance, he was aware he was shaking, terrified at what came next.

"Are you too cold?" she said.

He didn't answer but instead opened his window, the familiar smell of effluent flooding in, along with the heat. They turned down a rutted lane of the type he'd been down so often before, like the road to bloody nowhere, the Hiltons,

the Shangri-Las way off. Instead, it was the familiar scrub covered in plastic bottles, remnants of old bungalows left to ruin and anything else people thought to dump, five stars morphing into less than one, shopping at Poundland again, rather than the Bloomingdale's of Von Eil and his ilk. Weird, the girl had been smiley and chirpy when he'd got in the truck, but he sensed her wariness now, knew he was giving off a weird vibe, and he really worried about what he was becoming. The nutty, lonely white bloke traipsing through Asia he knew wasn't a good look, but it was one he was too frequently inhabiting, his only style, a single, one note fail.

"We're here," she said as they pulled up outside some tumbledown wooden huts.

"Thanks," he replied, noticing her scanning him head to toe, gaze eventually falling on the battered holdall, and he reddened.

She guided him gingerly to the ramshackle reception, and he opted for five nights, calculating what little that would leave him with as she demanded the money up front, like she'd seen enough. As he handed over the crumpled notes in a sad kind of silence, he received a key unsmilingly in return and directions. There was no one to show off the room, the brilliant amenities, to guide him gently through the pillow menu, the spa treatments, and as he opened the door he knew why – the cell-like space immediately screamed no frills. He chucked himself down on the bone hard mattress, looked up at the crashed helicopter above, familiar ceiling stained with age, neglect. Going for the emergency ration of Thai whisky in his backpack, he knocked back a couple of swigs, lit a cigarette, feeling that he could die here tonight, that no one would find him for a while, that no one cared. Scrolling through his phone, he let out a sick chuckle as the lack of messages, calls attested to his last morbid thought – he *was* alone and looking around the tiny room, it felt like the walls were closing in, like he didn't have anywhere left to run. Was this how it actually ended?

Chapter 18

It'd only taken a couple of hits of alcohol to rub the edge off, sun past the yardarm, cocktail hour after all. A stupid grin was beginning to spread across his face. He opened the rags for curtains and looked out at a row of garishly lit beach bars, but what the hell, any port in a storm. A new town meant new possibilities, surely. First things first, all business again, he texted Debs, Bill's mum, told her exactly where he was staying, what a gilt-edged invite but partly salving his conscience given his pledge to find the truth. He then texted Lerm his whereabouts, hoping the lad was worried, that he'd be worried enough to send money soon, soonest, like buggering now. But a response wasn't immediate, and he wondered if it might ever come. Sod him, sod them all, he thought, running a hand through thinning hair, as far as preparations went for another night on the piss and taking a couple more mouthfuls of whisky for luck, he headed out for his first evening in Sihanoukville, hoping it wouldn't be his last.

Stumbling from the bungalow, he did a double take as on the sand in front of him was a huge lizard. He stood stock still, but the thing's head was thrashing around, blue tongue poking in and out at an alarming rate, reptilian eyes by contrast a total blank, offering nothing. Looking at the scales, they were dull and leathery, like it was thousands of years old. It took one final step towards him before thinking better of it, turning and ambling back to the edge of the jungle that fringed the beach, a reminder the wild was never far away in this part of the world, he thought as he continued to shake. He'd seen one in Bangkok just a few nights ago – though it felt like years – evidence some parts of the city were literally sinking back into the swamp, and Som had told him then they

were bad luck, an omen.

He was relieved on entering the more human confines of the bar, which exhibited a different type of wildlife. Dan hadn't changed, but then he pretty much had just the clothes on his back, though looking around it wasn't like people dressed for the occasion. The shorts, sweat-soaked T-shirts and flip-flops brigade made him feel overdressed, for he was in nowhere-ville, the last chance saloon as one of his colleagues at the Daily had called it. Paedophile Gary bloody Glitter spent weekends here looking for victims, that's how low he was stooping. It was mostly *farang*, but he noticed a smattering of locals, both male and female, all of ages but he sensed they were selling their wares, smiles they flashed all too often revealing mostly twisted, mangled teeth, one lad already zeroing in on him.

He shook his head, nursing his beer for once, the delightfully named Angkor, looking at the label showing off the country's major attraction, thinking he couldn't be further away from that cultural delight. No, he was inhabiting a world of instant gratification, hence the booze, the just-lit fag, the fact he was now returning the gay whore's smile. Gay whore? Yep, the derogatory comment in his head shouted self-hate, but he couldn't bloody help himself.

"Hi, I'm Mark," said the lad, raising his beer with a bony hand.

Dan stayed silent but instead resignedly clinked the outstretched glass, noticing other white men in the bar now involved in similar transactions, though he didn't want to engage. He looked away. The place, the whole damn country was desperate, and that wasn't an aphrodisiac. Prostitution was ubiquitous in Thailand, obviously, but there they could take it or leave, here it seemed almost a matter of life and death. The sycophantic grins, the meaningless platitudes, the humourless fawning made him want to drink himself into oblivion again, but even if the company was shite, it still beat being completely alone.

“You want another drink, Mark?” he said with a shrug.

“Yes, please, mister.”

“It’s Dan, Mark, Dan,” he said, finally going in for a handshake, more an exercise in holding hands, the odd wiles of the East enchanting him all over again, marvelling at the smiley big brown eyes but he wondered what they’d seen, what was behind them.

He thought back to the beach, how he’d bumped into Lerm that first night on Coconut Island, sending a chill through him, though it was either engage or go back to the suffocating, coffin-shaped bungalow. Checking his phone, doing so neurotically, still nothing from the Thai lad and as if reading his mind, Mark smiled at him and he smiled back, letting himself go, nothing left to lose. Dan took him in properly for the first time, looking beyond the eyes, seeing the button nose, the high cheekbones, the lithe body accentuated by the flimsy tank top, white of which beautifully complemented his tan skin. All an act, a performance, but it had an appreciative audience, the lad bashfully turning away.

“What do you do here?” he said, the question he knew was a no-no, the one he couldn’t help asking, breathing in another lungful of sickly sweet smoke from the dirt-cheap clove cigarettes he was now addicted to.

“Do? This is my place. I own the bar. You didn’t expect that, did you, mister?”

He blushed, sitting back, shaking his head, listening to the flawless, unaccented English, serving him right for being so bloody prejudiced. Guilty, not wanting to talk anymore, he looked frantically around the place, suddenly paranoid that he’d been followed, that O’Reilly, the suited Asian, somehow knew where he was. How had it been so easy to get away? Surely they weren’t that stupid. Lighting up another fag, his phone dinged but he chomped into his lip when he saw that it wasn’t Lerm but Debs, who confirmed she was on her way to Sihanoukville. So much for tuning out, doing things on the downlow. He realised that whatever he did, wherever he

went, this thing was following him, as Peeklong had said on the island the spirits were restless, and Dan had stirred up something that couldn't just be put back in its box.

"Fuck," he said to himself, scrolling through FB now, even more messages from Thai_truthseeker, increasingly insistent that they needed to see each other face to face.

Just what the hell had he unleashed? He pulled up a map of Cambodia on his phone, zoomed out so Southeast Asia unravelled before him, trying to get his tongue around all the alien names, imagining faceless, teeming cities and the lush, sweaty jungles surrounding them full of those roaming spirits and tears sprung to his eyes. Lost all over again, a white ghost in a luridly coloured landscape, and he knew he was prey, easy to pick off in a place where life was so cheap. He nodded his head, realisation coming to him, like he'd just received advice from a concerned friend – if he actually had one of those – telling Dan he needed to go home, had to get back to England. He zoomed out the map several times more, traced a finger from the little pinhead indicating where he was to where he needed to go. It was a few centimetres on the screen, but he knew the reality; he had the theory, but what was the how? London calling.

"Sorry, I'm not disturbing you, am I? You seemed busy, busy in your head, so I thought I'd leave you to it for a bit," said Mark, putting an easy hand on his thigh.

"No, just a bit preoccupied right now," he replied, allowing the hand to rest there, putting the phone away.

"Like another drink? I was thinking a whisky set. You look like you need to relax."

"How'd you know that?"

"I do yoga, your posture, the way you hunch your back. You look so tense, mister. Time to take it easy. You're on holiday, right?"

"Something like that," he said, emitting a laugh, but it sounded uncomfortable in his ears, ramming his legs against the tabletop.

Mark wordlessly got up, what was there to say really, and he drained the rest of his drink, awaiting more, relying on someone's largesse once again so he could get absolutely out of his head, so he didn't have to think, hoping that would chase away the fear that gripped him just for a while. It was the opposite for what he needed to do of course, needing a clear head so he could put the theory he'd just come up with into practice, instead it was the usual stasis, welded into his seat by pathetic indecision, a tentativeness that had got him here.

They didn't really talk as they drank, Dan surveying Mark over the array of bottles, spark of attraction oddly missing, though his vision was becoming more and more fuzzy, faculties increasingly laboured, clumsy, overwhelmingly tired like it was all catching up with him. An embarrassed smile etched to his face as he went for a top up and knocked a glass crashing to the floor, Mark patting him on the knee, a knee that felt almost numb, whispering in his ear not to worry, cleaning up around him like he wasn't even there. The last thing he remembered.

First sense to be activated was hearing, ringing of the phone blaring in his ears, the second, smell and acrid smoke filling his nostrils, tasting it, choking, flinching at the wall of heat searing his skin but taking all his effort to open eyes that felt glued shut, sensory overload now, suddenly wide awake and recoiling from the orange flames licking up around the bed. He slid off the mattress, arms frantically batting away the fire, crawling at floor level where there was still oxygen, inhaling it in snatched lungfuls. Vague, panicked fragments of memory came together, the drinks, Mark and then nothing, nothing but questions, like presumably he'd got back to the bungalow but in the glow of the blaze it felt like hell, as if karma had got him at last.

He wasn't giving in that bloody easily. Fire raging around him, he lurched instinctively for where he thought the door was, though pulling at the handle, it was stuck fast. Dan rattled it harder and harder, but it stood firm, a roar causing him to wrest his neck around only to see the bed he'd been in seconds ago roiling in flames. All the tension in his body uncoiled, despite convulsing in coughs at the belching smoke, and he desperately kicked at the old wooden walls until a section finally splintered with a crack. Pulling at the broken planks with bloodied hands, he stuck his mouth through the gap, heaved in the fresh air, everything wobbly, vision intermittent, snatches of his life flickering before him.

He managed one last kick, hauling his body through the hole, stumbling as far as he could before collapsing blackened on the sand, its cool dampness like balm, rubbing it all over, fiercely trying to cool skin that burnt with a heat he'd never known, didn't think possible. But a blast that reverberated through his body caused him to swing round, engrossed as the shack seemed to shift on its very foundations, structure vibrating with an awful energy as the flames shot through the roof. Another whump saw the windows shatter as though a bomb had gone off, all the air around him swallowed up by the inferno and he looked at his shaking hands, charred and battered, thinking that should've been him inside, reasoning somehow he'd missed another date with death, knowing he didn't have any chances left. Maybe one fire is a coincidence, but two?

Chapter 19

“You were drunk, smoking in bed!” shouted a man into his face.

He couldn't get any words out, still lying prone on the beach, skin tingling with the heat radiating from the blazing bungalow, surveying his blistered, blackened arms as two uniformed goons now appeared behind who he took to be the owner of the resort.

“You gonna pay for this,” the man continued, jabbing a finger at him, sweat on his top lip, face flushed as he waved the cops forward.

One grabbed each arm, they dragged Dan to his feet, bungalow collapsing in on itself as he imagined the battered holdall, his remaining clothes, worldly goods reduced to what he had on his back, burnt rags, no bargaining power save some Cambodian shrapnel in his pocket that amounted to about a dollar and his mobile. What was that going to bloody buy him?

He was sat in the office just off the makeshift reception, shivering despite the burning pain searing through his arms, desperately trying to distract himself, thinking how everything seemed make do and mend in this country. Dan eyed the rusting filing cabinets, the bare bulb dangling down as he sat awkwardly on a rickety chair, trying to steady his hands on a wobbly table. No bugging Hilton this, not even a Butlins, though the not nice owner of Nice Bungalow was sitting opposite shaking with anger. As for the two cops, they were staring at him with rheumy eyes, pistols on hips.

“Cigarette?” he asked, sticking a self-entitled hand out, casual tone because a sudden numbness had come over him and one of the policemen – one fat, one skinny had to be part

of the traditional good cop/bad cop routine – slung him a packet of the cheap local fags and he cheered inside, lighting up.

“You pay,” said the skinny one.

Yep, he was the bad cop, thought Dan, wordlessly looking at the sallow, pockmarked face, the bug eyes, while the owner rocked back and forward now as though his very world had ended. He emptied out his pockets on the table, some gum, those coins, the phone, blew out a huge cloud of smoke and smiled, making it obvious that was all he had. The shrill ring of the mobile suddenly shot through him again, numbness evaporating, heart thumping, taking him back to the burning bungalow as it was the phone, Lerm’s original call that had saved him. Fat cop nodded he should answer.

“Hello.”

“Dan, Danny...”

“How did you fucking know? Lerm, it’s always right place, right time with you, like my fairy bloody godmother. You’re either psychic or you know something.”

“What happened? I’ve been going nuts. Man, you’re a bad omen. Everywhere you go I swear. I just need to hold you again, protect you.”

“What do you know? You realise my damn bungalow on the beach in Sihanoukville just went up in flames with me in it. Your call saved me,” he said, breathless, thumping the table.

“A fire? What the hell happened? I called because I was worried. You’re my love. But Sihanoukville, go figure, that’s where most *farang* end up. Like Hotel California. They never freakin’ leave.”

“I’ll live for now, and thanks for your confidence in me. You might turn your nose up but where the hell am I meant to go? Look, I’d love to believe you’re my guardian angel, Lerm. I dunno. One fire is bad luck, is two a coincidence? I was out last night, chatting in some bar, then... I dunno, it all went blank. Next thing I know, I wake up in my shack by the

beach, and it's on fire, and the resort owner wants me to pay up. I need money."

"Buddy, are you really okay?"

"Okay? Am I okay? Lerm, what the fuck do you think? I'm not okay, I'm the fucking opposite of okay, okay!" Dan screamed into the receiver.

"Danny, listen..."

"No, you listen to me for once. I'll tell you why I'm not fucking okay, why none of this is fucking okay. I've lost my wife and kid, there's someone around every corner that needs me dead, I'm wanted back home for killing a young girl, I'm in yet another country I can't understand and the guy who says he loves me I don't know from Adam. I'm homeless, jobless, loveless and all for bloody what? For two dead backpackers. I can't bring 'em back to life. I thought I could, but I can't. I'm going home. I'm done," he said, smashing his fist down on the table to emphasise every point, knuckles throbbing, bloodied.

"Danny, just listen..."

"I nearly burnt to death. Blisters all up my arms. Now this fucker wants paying. I could be arrested, taken away," he said, body finally going limp, tears rolling down his face.

"Stop. Just listen to me. I can make it all go away. Hand the phone over, I'll deal with it."

"What the hell can you do from there?"

"Danny, if you want to get out of there alive, hand the fucking phone over. Now!"

He took a deep breath, shakily handed his mobile to the resort owner, who cocked his head to one side, listening intently, colour draining from the man's face, expression flipping from anger to fear. Dan needed air, couldn't stand the tension in the room, the disdainful stare of the skinny cop and he grabbed another fag from the crumpled packet, stepped outside, stumbling listlessly down the beach. The bungalow had already been reduced to smouldering ashes and surveying it he could see nothing of his had survived.

The bar, the bloody bar! It suddenly came back to him, that Mark character, the young lad, pretty much the last thing he remembered before his vision became fuzzy. He stomped across the sand, zeroing in on the innocuous fairy lights of the cheap no name drinking den, could already see some potbellied *farang* on the so-called veranda luxuriating in the first foaming beers of the morning, like so many pigs at a trough as though they were completely unaware of the towering inferno just down the beach. It disgusted him. The whole place was vile and as he burst through the entrance, he was shaking, red hot, boiling over. He wheeled one way then the other but no Mark, instead an attractively dressed forty-something woman shot him a disarming smile from behind the bar.

“Ah, we were worried, Mr Dan, but I’m glad you’re okay,” she said, wraparound *ao dai* accentuating her slim waist, that smile again, gentle hand patting his arm, the perfect host.

“How... how do you know my name? Where’s Mark?”

“Mark?” she said, momentarily scrunching up her smooth features, guiding him to a table away from the rest of the customers with a hand sporting immaculately done nails, sitting him in front of an electric fan.

“Yeah, the owner of this place. He drugged me.”

“Dan, there’s no Mark. I’m the owner. You came in here last night. Drunk already. You told me your story. I think you’d been smoking. You know, little bit of the happy drug. You’d had one too many, I think you’d say, and I escorted you back to your bungalow. Safely.”

“No! Mark was here. We chatted. He was buying me drinks all night,” he said, wrenching his neck one way then the other, looking for the lad, noticing other *farang* staring, the lady’s hand still gently caressing his arm, tears of confusion springing to his eyes, lost all over again as he slowly shook his head.

He came out of the travel agents, name on the flight manifest, trip home booked for a week's time via KL as no way he could risk re-entering Thailand. The lady had asked him if he wanted to pay there and then, and for some reason he hesitated, but rather than risk losing a sale, she said she could hold the tickets for 48 hours. Southeast Asia was going to kill him one way or another and he worried about being buried in some no name grave, a pauper's funeral for the next *farang* to have gone off the rails in this confounding place, so Dan wasn't sure why he didn't just pay up immediately, paper in his pocket with the flight details – just that, not worth the paper it was written on. He needed to go back to England and answer for his crime, though while it was good karma, it was a pathetic surrender, an admission of how his life had failed. Maybe the fact he was meeting Debs, Bill's mum, had played a part in his hesitancy, since coward that he was he wouldn't have to tell her he was actually going back to London because it wasn't official, wouldn't have to explain he couldn't find the truth or apologise for having given up. Of course, there was one other problem with flying home, his passport had gone up in flames but he couldn't get too upset as he knew it should've been him, though while the sore, blistered skin would heal, there was no cure for the mental anguish.

Walking into the lobby of the Aristocrat Hotel, dressed in some hastily purchased slacks and shirt combo from the local department store courtesy of Lerm's money transfer, he was aware of the staff throwing wary looks his way. Patina of civility lent by the outfit probably couldn't cover for that wild, vacant expression he knew he was afflicted by, though his shirtsleeves were also discoloured, stained a mustard yellow from the weeping sores from the burns and all he could do was offer a smile in return, yep the mad *farang* was back in town. Looking around reception, he couldn't escape that expression as it was relayed back to him infinite times in the rose-coloured floor to ceiling mirrors that harked back to the 1980s when this monstrosity was probably built. He

should know by now, the grander the name in Asia, the less salubrious the venue, and there was a certain desperation about this place, he thought, as he squeaked over dulled green marble and into the dusty Kings Lounge – note no apostrophe – bar, doubtful a so-called aristocrat had been within a thousand square miles of it. What he took to be Debs was waving over at him, pacing, fidgety like she had everything on her mind. The fact she was wearing large Jackie O sunglasses inside probably hinting at her mental state, and his stomach spasmed as he got closer, knowing he couldn't bloody save anyone, barely himself, let alone two dead backpackers.

"I'm so glad you came, love," she said, wrapping him in a mum-sized hug.

He nodded, not knowing what to say, holding her at arm's length, tears springing to his own eyes, imagining hers moistening behind those shades, everything about her motherly, maternal, plump figure poured into a busy floral dress, dangly earrings setting off the bouffant hair. It all said the show must go on, hinted at strength, put him to shame.

"Debs, it's just..."

"Shush, I don't want anyone else pissing on my parade. But I thought you needed to see this. Not sure you get the news here," she said, as they both sat down on the red velveteen seats, so threadbare the stuffing was spilling out.

Debs pushed a wrinkled copy of the Bangkok Post towards him, headlines in the most modest terms trying to downplay the latest massacre of students by the authorities, though just beneath that was what got his heart thrashing, palms sweating, the story her shaky finger had alighted on: "Coconut Island 2 to be executed after guilty verdict"

"No!" he screamed, crumpling to the table.

"You've got to help. There's no one else," she said, mumsy hand stroking his arm, those sunglasses gone, revealing a river of mascara running from her eyes.

"You came all the bloody way to tell me that?"

"Dan, love, there's no one that can help me or these poor

boys. There're three other mums like me out there. Corrine's and the fishermen's pair. I've looked into the eyes of those lads and I know they didn't do it. I've been around long enough to know."

"What makes you think I can do anything? I'm pathetic. Look at me."

"I heard it in your voice. Your words. That stuff on Facebook, it's from the heart. You care."

"So everyone says," he replied but so quietly, almost to himself, like a mantra, trying to convince, revisiting that temple again in his mind, Bill's caved in head, the way Corrine's ghostly pallor contrasted with that crimson caked hair.

"Billy, he had an altercation the night before."

"The night before what?" said Dan with a shrug.

"For God's sake, the night before. What do you think I mean? This lad, a Mahogany Joe, a Brit, apparently he's a small-time drug dealer on the island but he was coming onto Corrine and Billy stepped in. Just like Bill. Some pushing and shoving, more like handbags at ten paces stuff but still..."

"Who told you this?"

"I asked around, several of the local expats. Monroe, a Nigel Monroe, was the most forthcoming."

"Nige, right. Funny he didn't really bloody tell me anything. It's like omerta down there, mafioso. I need to find this Joe."

"So you're going to help?" she said, laying a photo on the table.

Debs had played a blinder. The smooth, angular features, alabaster skin and floppy hair almost an otherworldly gold, Bill smiling as if he knew he had everything to live for and Dan couldn't tear his eyes away from the image, couldn't bloody say no. Taking the piece of paper from the travel agents out of his pocket, scrunching it up into a tiny ball, setting it alight, watching it burn like he'd witnessed Nice Bungalow disintegrate, he eased back in his seat, lit a cigarette and nodded, for once prepared to actually run towards

danger.

“Billy was one of a kind, y’know. As I said before he was gay but to me that made him even more special. He shone with it.”

“Debs, he was so, so lucky to have a mum like you, believe me,” said Dan, patting her arm, though she’d no longer meet his eyes, as if she didn’t want to reveal any more of her pain but it meant Debs couldn’t see his own tears.

He was rattling along in the back of a pickup truck along another rutted track on what felt like the road to nowhere, sweating through the new clothes he’d bought with Lerm’s money, already feeling dishevelled. The other passengers in the back didn’t look up, though he could see their faces reflected his own fears, guessing they were all Cambodian, skin burnt almost black by the sun, labourers looking to earn more money over in Thailand. Except the Thais hated the Cambodians, more than they hated each other, so the only means of entry was illegal. Dan swatted a mosquito on his arm, missed, feeling a sharp sting, body now covered in bites as well as blisters, prone to the vagaries of the wild, air like a wet blanket leaching away his energy, his hope, for he’d sunken this low, was sitting in the back of a truck with a load of illegals chancing it all to earn one-hundred baht a day. But for him, everything was also on the line.

The trafficker had not really given specific instructions but was happy to take his money with greasy hands in yet another no name bar in Sihanoukville. “No passport, no problem,” the man had said with a crooked smile, the smile of a second-hand car dealer and it hadn’t slowed his racing thoughts, stilled his booming heart. But looking out into the blackness, the jungle blotting out the beautiful silvery light of a South-east Asian moon, he knew he only had days to save the fishermen, could imagine the ammo had been ordered, the

guns cleaned, soon to be loaded, their young lives about to be extinguished amid several pumps of a gunman's finger. No, Thailand wanted this embarrassment swept away, so the authorities could say to Bill and Corrine's parents that justice was done, signalling to tourists the country was open for business, there was no problem, the Coconut Island case just an aberration in the Land of the Smile. He looked again at the trembling Cambodians, shaking at what those same authorities would do to them if caught sneaking over the border, the snide behind the Thai smile.

When Debs had gone, he'd read the article about the student massacre, a sit-in on campus at Chulalongkorn University, all no doubt unarmed, though the paper hadn't mentioned that key fact, despite delighting its readers with a death toll of twenty. Was that a smiling matter, did that signal a safe country, a nation at ease with itself, he thought, shaking his head but knowing Frank at the Daily hadn't even published the story. Could hear him now – "Blow me, too much heat from above, young Dan. We write yarns about sex, fluffiness, nothing controversial." The Chinless Wonder and his cronies, the likes of Mr Gip, Von Eil, insisted on good news stories, with anything else deemed "unpatriotic".

He listened to the low, neurotic murmur around him, the whine of the old engine, no comfort to be found anywhere. Dan was certain if he was spotted by Thai security forces – and he was told the army regularly patrolled the border in their drab, cheap olive-green fatigues – they'd open fire. It didn't matter that he was a *farang*, but at a few metres behind a gunsight in the early hours of the morning would that even be obvious, anyway? And what was a foreigner without a passport, a dearth of tourist dollars to spend, if not a pointless waste of space? Like those fuckers that raided the campus at Chula, he knew they were young, trigger-happy, frightened, all too aware their country was split down the middle, those for the King, those against, the enemy was within so what the hell did that make him?

The truck was slowing, and he sensed they'd soon be turfed out, every man and woman for themselves. That trafficker with the greasy palms and conman smile indicated as much in the bar, widening his arms, saying in his broken, pidgin English they should spread out, avoid being clustered in a group. They'd stopped on the brow of a hill but pulled in tight to the treeline, the driver the first to get out, inexplicably wearing sunglasses when the sun was long from poking above the horizon. He shooed the raggedy bunch from the vehicle like he was letting animals back out into the wild, then immediately retreated to his cab as if he wanted no further part in the charade.

Dan looked ahead as he stumbled along the track, truck engine receding in his ears, a feeling of being all alone, that it was solely down to him now. The moon glinted off a river in the valley not far below, Thailand the other side, lights in the distance from the border town he took to be Bang Klong Luk, though it was luck he really needed, a resource he was running short of. He counted down all the near misses he'd had recently, nine lives ebbing away, wondering, could it be that easy? "Simple," the trafficker had said, but Dan knew the only simple part had been him handing over the money.

His breathing was loud in his ears, and though he didn't dare look back, there was no one ahead of him, sensing not only was he at the front of the disparate group, he was some distance in the lead. Caution, patience was not in his nature, he was the crazy foreigner among the "keep a cool heart" brigade and he knew this meant he was more likely to screw up, be caught but the adrenaline coursing through his body ensured he kept striding on. He blundered off the road, into the jungle, following only a vague path, though happy to be swallowed by the darkness, not feeling as exposed, full on flight mode, like it was his default setting.

He'd reached the river, rusted barbed wire fence ahead, broken down in places, trembling at the fact this was such a bloody well-trodden route, shaking his head at what a

ridiculous performance this all was, knowing it was a con, realising the Thais couldn't be that stupid, unbelievable that a group of illegals could just bowl over the border and be welcomed with open arms, a steaming plate of fried rice awaiting them and a cold one. His chest was heaving up and down, while Dan cocked his head to one side, then the other, the teeming symphony of cicadas, the crunching of foliage from behind, the tinkling of the gently flowing river ahead but nothing else. Peering across the natural border, he sure didn't sense freedom, though like lives he'd also run out of choices and somehow he had to find his balls, go against a lifetime of being a coward.

He patted his pocket, the wad of notes there, phone, the knife, all wrapped in plastic bags, pretty much the only instructions they'd been given, almost like those meaningless safety videos on every flight that talked about lifejackets and rafts. As bloody if. Wading into the waist high water he sank into the mud, river like a warm bath but he shivered, his teeth chattering as he reached the bank the other side, grabbing madly at the stout weeds, pulling himself up with one last heave, daring to breathe out but through the greenery the black hard metal of the muzzle of a gun was levelled at his face. His shoulders sagged, he'd been watched the entire time, like the whole thing had been a trap, and he wanted to shout a warning to those poor bastards behind, but instead he swallowed it back, raising his arms in pitiful surrender.

Chapter 20

“I could shoot you right here, you know, like bang, bang,” said the soldier, eyes as focused on him as the gun, taut smile.

Tremors reverberated through him, elation of stepping on Thai soil, closing in on his aim to get justice cruelly ripped away, taking all the air from his lungs, unable to get the words out, instead looking from those eyes to the steady trigger finger, though the lakes of sweat spreading on the green uniform hinted the coolness of the gaze was all an act. A young, trigger-happy soldier in a paddy field in the middle of nowhere, great, what could possibly go wrong, he thought, as he began sinking into the sodden soil, legs leaden, knowing he could be buried here and no one would bloody know. He listened as the rustling in the nearby bushes stopped, complete silence now, save the insect symphony, knowing the Cambodians had been more cautious and were probably lying low. He'd been the canary in the mineshaft, and they'd successfully waited for him to suffocate.

As the uneasy stand-off continued, he turned his palms skyward, like what now, what the hell was he meant to do. But the soldier as well as eyeing him seemed to be listening intently too, surely aware they'd come as a group, human traffickers didn't deal in ones, not enough money in it given a crude risk-reward analysis. Dan looked into the soldier's eyes again, wondering if he was making a similar calculation, like was he worth the hassle, this tourist so far off the beaten track he was up shit creek, when there were probably a half dozen or more of the expendable enemy just over yonder. He also imagined there'd be forms to be filled in, detention to be arranged, the British Embassy to be contacted and he knew frantically trying to unpick his thoughts that he needed an

angle. Everyone had a sodding angle here, and he needed to find one. Quick.

“The others are back there,” he said, thumbing behind him at the treeline, watching as the finger continued to hover over the trigger.

The radio crackled on the trooper’s lapel, he engaged it, spewing out a diatribe of Thai, though all the while remaining focused on his quarry, like he wasn’t bothered that there were a rabble of other illegals out there, he had a big fish. Reaching into the pocket of his bedraggled shorts, the soldier barely flinched as Dan drew out a handful of notes, expression unchanged, though the grunt slowly shook his head.

“Amazing Thailand,” he said with a cruel laugh, invoking the country’s catch-all tourist slogan, wrapping one arm roughly around Dan’s shoulders, propelling him forward through the field.

Yep, it was amazing in all sorts of ways, he thought, though for all the wrong reasons. Wad uncomfortable in his pocket, rejected bribe sitting heavily, and he wondered whether this prick was incorruptible for a change or maybe it just wasn’t enough. Possibly they’d get into a more secluded spot and he’d shoot him through the back of the head and take the dosh, anyway. Amazing Thailand, indeed. He scrabbled around in his pockets again, fishing out the crumpled pack of cheap shit Sampoorna clove cigarettes, offering one to his captor, who waved him away, clean living as well as incorruptible and Dan shrugged as he lit one for himself, drawing it deep down.

They came to what seemed the regulation beaten up 4x4 the other side of the field, soldier motioning for him to get in. Silence reigned as they rattled along rutted tracks and into the crudely lit town, Bang Klong Luk, laughing to himself at how he’d memorised the train timetable, though knowing sadly he wouldn’t be taking up his seat on the Bangkok express any time soon. It felt like he was going to be allowed to live at least, but as his mind turned to the two fishermen, Bill and

Corrine, Debs, for God's sake, his shoulders slumped, knowing he'd failed everyone.

They pulled to a halt outside the usual anonymous office block of a police station, thinking back to Peeklong, how this all pretty much started. Until he ran over Suzie he'd never been in trouble with the cops, never even been in a cop shop, now he couldn't keep away. The soldier handed him over to a waiting piggy-faced officer, who was poured into the usual brown uniform, the grunt exchanging a few words with the man before returning to the pickup. It was like a vow of silence as he was dragged along grim linoleum corridors with only the hum of the strip lighting above. As they approached a cell door, he looked in to see several men sat cowed on a bench, chained to one another, men dressed pretty much in the rags of the Cambodians of earlier, their faces studying the floor. The cop let out a sigh as he rattled a key in the lock, swung open the squeaky door and shoved Dan inside. The men barely looked up, though they eased down to make room for him on the bench.

"So, tourist, completely out of your depth this time," said the policeman, eyeing him as if for the first time through the bars.

He shook, like how was he using the same slur as Peeklong, as if he knew exactly who he was but as soon as he went to open his mouth, question it, the cop had about-turned, the echo from his boots on the lino getting fainter and fainter as he then focused on the thick blackened bars in front of him. Punching and punching at them until his fists were bloodied, he put his head in his hands, thinking they could just let him rot here, putrid stench in the air like that of the temple not so many weeks ago. Then he'd simply been able to run outside, run away.

They'd all retired to filthy mats on the floor when lights out

came, no window, so no idea whether it was day or night, though the telly on the wall aimed into the cell continued to flicker all hours, like a sick form of torture. Dan felt as if he were almost holding his breath because every time he exhaled he expanded into the body of the man next to him, a fag paper's width between them. Even swiping the sweat from his brow meant elbowing his neighbour in the ribs, so he lay there, a reminder of school when the sadistic PE teacher made them play statues and anyone that moved got a slap. Sweat he did, however, it seeming to ooze from every pore in the airless space filled with too many humans and not enough oxygen, a single ceiling fan simply churning up the stifling air, wafting around the stink like it was cutting through shit.

There was a prisoner on the other side too. His sleeping neighbour's face was lolling onto his, and Dan could taste the fetid breath, the man's snores assaulting his ears. He scrutinised another ceiling, probably white once upon a time but now a muddied murk from the humidity, the filth, panic radiating out of him, feeling he had to move but knowing he couldn't. The phone had been taken, a chit signed, but seeing the mobile spirited into some locker felt like his last lifeline gone, though weirdly they'd overlooked the knife that he patted in his pocket. But maybe this was all another bloody plan. Who's to say that blade couldn't be used against him, an inconvenience conveniently sorted, like the backpacker case.

Thoughts continued to churn in his head, some late-night TV news show had replaced the inanity of a Thai soap, the sombre voice of the anchor, the jacket and tie evoking seriousness but he was lost, the language still a mystery to him, the place a puzzle he'd never solved and he felt ashamed. Coming here, to this country, he'd been as arrogant as those *farang* he derided, those who never bothered assimilating, those who could get others to do their bidding because they simply paid, the Von Eils of this world. But they were smart and he was a bloody idiot, an idiot and a coward and as an image of the two Thai fishermen flashed up on the screen, his

face flushed an ugly red, feeling completely impotent locked up here while he could imagine the words of the funereal TV presenter delivered in an awful staccato that probably told the audience they had just days left.

Some ridiculous comedy followed the news, gurning clowns, bright, wacky set, canned laughter making his plight all the more surreal, overlaid now by an overture of snoring from his seemingly unruffled cellmates. He thought back to his interaction with the trafficker, the handing over of a wad of notes that he'd swiftly removed from the scene with greasy hands, the lop-sided smile when he asked whether it came with a hundred per cent guarantee. That elation when he crossed the river had been so real but so fleeting and all the crueller for it, wondering again whether it was all part of some elaborate trap – the suited Asian man in Phnom Penh, “Mark” in Sihanoukville, the fire at the beach bungalow and now this. It was like the deaths on Coconut Island and his getting involved had massively upended the equilibrium, as Peeklong had said not so long ago, the spirits were unsettled and roaming, running amok.

He was drifting in and out, the TV blaring in the background, but the fact it was in Thai like some weird alien lullaby, that fuzzy bridge between awake and asleep now. His eyelids were heavy, and though the sounds and the smells told him he should be on constant alert, he couldn't fight it, luxuriated in it almost, drifting off, his one refuge, the only place he didn't have to think.

Dan's body involuntarily jumped, a bolt of electricity through him. A girl in white standing there while he was pinned to the floor, her pale flowing dress almost as translucent as her hair but her eyes were shark black and she was beckoning as though asking him to come with her, follow. He felt himself shaking his head, remembering Suzie, trying to wrestle free of her ice-cold grip, but looking closer he saw that her hair was stained a horrible crimson at the back, defiling the purity of the image. Noticing the other blemish, the

black under her nails, slivers of blood and skin like she'd tried to fight someone off, a chill seized him, realising it was Corrine but weren't they one and the same, Suzie and the battered backpacker? Opening his eyes she'd gone, and he was looking at the glow of the TV but his whole body was shaking and rapt by a reddening bruise on his forearm where he'd been gripped, he knew none of it could be dismissed as a bloody dream. The man next to him was sitting up, babbling, wide-eyed and pointing at where she'd last been standing.

The man wouldn't stop jabbing him in the chest, as if accusing him of something, red, watery eyes, stunned expression like they'd witnessed something unspeakable. Dan thought back to when Lerm told him the spirits of murder victims couldn't rest until the perpetrator had been caught and he shook his head. It'd all been hokum before but this man was rendered incoherent by what he'd just seen, the pig-like cop from earlier swiftly unlocking the door due to the commotion, smashing the illegal over the head with a baton, blood spattering against the concrete floor and he was dragged writhing out of the cell, out of sight, though the yelling persisted, strangled cries in the deep recesses of the building. Dan looked on as every man registered the shouts of their friend turning to tortured screams, wondering at the hell he'd somehow unleashed, knowing he had to calm the ghostly woman with the impenetrable eyes, help her to rest in peace.

Having first thought of the hit-and-run victim, he shook his head, funny how the mind was so quick to rustle up that image, the guilt lodged there like an infected splinter, it all going septic in his head, toxic. He'd run due to the accident, though it was no bugging accident yet it caused him to drag his wife and son down into the depths with him, then he abandoned them. Easy to be true to yourself, authentic when you abdicate all responsibilities, he thought, taking a huge bite out of his thumbnail, metallic taste of blood in his mouth, screams of the man finally subsiding, pig waltzing past the

cell swinging his stained baton. If he ever got out of this place, he had to explain to Som and Max that at the first sign of trouble he'd run, the usual coward's way, and he owed them at least a reason.

He'd had a fitful sleep, and while the ghost-like figure never came back, the gap next to him where the man had been remained just another conundrum he felt responsible for. Nerves shot, the whistling of the piggy policeman scythed through Dan, bringing him properly to and he sat up straight, looking out the bars, noticing the man's patent leather boots sticky with a syrupy substance that he realised with a start was blood, his neighbour's blood.

"What happened to him?" he said through a parched mouth, pointing at the empty space.

"Tourist, nothing to concern your pretty head about. But look what the cat dragged in thanks to your tip. Real snake in the grass, you. Selling out your fellow illegals to save your own skin. Britain lost her colonies decades ago, but you're still trying to lord it over people, *farang*, except you're nothing anymore. Nothing!"

His head rang with the insult, and looking through bleary eyes into the cell opposite he saw the burning, accusing stares of the half dozen or so Cambodians who'd been with him on the truck.

"You blamed me? You bloody told them it was me?"

"Maybe I should lock you in the cell with them. Survival of the fittest, but I've got better news for you, you're a waste of space here, a poor little *farang*, even lower than these fuckers, so why should we bother? Don't want the hassle of dealing with the British Embassy and their superiority complex. But you're a guest here, don't forget it," he said, echoing Peeklong's putdowns, like they were all reading from a set script but roughly unlocking the cell door.

"I can go?" he said, almost backing away from the threshold, disbelieving, like that lad Moi when they'd released him from his particular prison, as though he'd never

be free and Dan felt similarly cowed by this offer of escape but he didn't have a choice.

Chapter 21

He was looking out at what he thought he'd never see again when he was in that sweaty, stinking cell, cityscape of Bangkok unfolding through the window. Dan swivelled one way, then the other, scoping out other bus passengers, certain he was being followed but the cast of betel-chewing yokels and country hicks with belongings in cardboard boxes tied up with string made it unlikely, unless it was a very elaborate disguise. Hands trembling, he stared back out into the great unknowable, baffling place, so many possibilities in the sprawl but too many things that could go wrong. It was something about the unfinished monoliths scarring the landscape, like the money had suddenly run dry, the concrete bird's nest of highways, the swampland, jungle nipping at its very edges, burgeoning like his own worries, all alien, disconcerting. When he first came to the city he thought it offered a perfect escape, a cloak of anonymity but he now knew he stood out like a white ghost, just like the ghoul that had visited him last night, still unsure if he'd been awake, confused all over again as to whether it was Suzie or Corrine, shivering at the memory.

He looked at his phone, fidgety, needing a fag, though the mobile didn't provide any comfort, no word from Lerm, like he was suddenly persona non grata, as if the whole thing had been an ingenious scam, a prick tease and another thing he didn't understand when initially it all felt so vital, almost life and death. Was this how gay relationships worked? Opening FB, his heart began to pound as he clicked on a new message from Thai_truthseeker, shaking his head as he did so.

“Those fishermen will be dead soon, and you'll have blood on your hands. We're running out of time. Come and see me now. TTS”

He typed back something rude as he felt the flush rise in his cheeks, breaths quickening, but deleted it just as quickly. There was a grain of truth and he felt guilty, knowing he had the means to do something but it was like he was in quicksand, a whole list of obstacles before he felt he could get to Thai_truthseeker as he didn't even trust it was pukka, imagining some keyboard warrior in their underpants in Luton on a bloody wind up. But every time he thought of the fishermen, he could see their desperate, boyish faces, their mothers' expressions as if permanently set in stone, twisted in horror, gentle, poverty-stricken people made to pay the price for someone else's sick pleasure, for that's what he believed had happened to Bill and Corrine. The person or persons who did it were self-entitled, psychotic, enjoyed what they were doing, knew they'd get away with it and he felt red hot, breaths coming faster and faster, neighbour staring at him and all Dan could do was put his head in his hands, rock back and forth as his heart boomed in his chest, needing to ride it out.

"Where are you? How do I know you're for real?" he typed back to Thai_thruthseeker, pressing send this time, knowing despite the fear, he needed to appease those restless spirits, make sure he fulfilled his pledge to Debs, nope, he'd come too bloody far to just give up.

He arrived in the perfumed lobby, the heady smell bringing him back, and despite everything, it was a good memory. Dan had been selfish; he pushed away his wife and child, but he needed to be himself. Yeah, he shouldn't have married and had a kid, but people do because gays often grow up surrounded by prejudice, despised by their own flesh and blood, simply programmed to self-hate, running away from themselves. But he knew you couldn't run forever, smile reflected back to him in the lift's hall of mirrors as it lurched up what felt like infinite storeys to some implausibly numbered floor

in the sky.

Hammering on the door because he was fed up with being polite, it hadn't got him anywhere, and he needed answers, enjoying the element of surprise, revelling in the fact he hadn't called first. For once. No, he wasn't playing fair this time. He was engaging via different rules, their rules, whoever they were, he thought, as the door slowly swung open.

"What the fuck," said Lerm, unsmiling, arms folded.

"Well, aren't you going to invite me in?" he said, eyes going immediately to a pair of overly large Italian loafers in the hallway.

"Danny, I wasn't expecting this, you were in Cambodia, it's not safe here, not in Thailand."

"Oh, wait, so I'm not safe here with you, I'm not welcome..."

"Danny Boy, haven't you learned your freaking lesson, this country's closed to you."

He barged past Lerm, kicking out at the shoes as he did so, down the hallway, into the living room, noting the extensive dining table laden with still leftover food, a couple of half empty wine glasses, the place reeking of sex.

"Dan, Danny, man, don't go in there," said Lerm from behind.

But it was too late, he was already in the atmospherically lit bedroom, eyes drawn to the rucked up sheets, two large human-sized dents in the obviously recently vacated mattress, a man's red silk tie lying on one of the pillows, open box of condoms on the bedside table.

"I don't understand you!" he screamed, gripping Lerm round those well-built shoulders but digging his fingers deep into the flesh, looking into empty eyes, a vacant expression, having no idea who this person was.

"You don't need to understand me. We were nothing, nothing, bud, nothing at all."

"Wait, one minute ago I was Danny Boy, now I'm just your buddy, like a fucking nobody," he said, roughly shaking

Lerm over and over, tension as if having sucked all the air out of the room, Dan's chest heaving up and down.

They continued to wrestle one another, sweat coating Lerm's brow, the lad's laboured, rasping breaths hot on his skin, so close, face to face but Dan noticed tears in his eyes. The poker face had transformed into something real, like he was emotionally engaged, reminiscent of the time the Thai said he loved him, those three little words having pretty much changed his life, and he was desperate to get back there.

"I can't do this," said Lerm, shoving him away.

He flew back, careered into a chest of drawers, a bang as he cracked his head, instinctively putting a hand to his hair-line, fingers covered in blood, which dripped on the cream carpet in thick welts, spreading out like ink on a blotter, Lerm's expression having switched to an awful nothingness again as he loomed over him.

"What can't you do? And who are you really? I don't get you, I don't even bloody know you," said Dan, back on his feet, swiping up a wallet on the coffee table between them, fingering the numerous credit cards, scanning each one, each name different, each sending a chill through him as he sent them cascading to the floor one by one, shedding them like the lad shed personas. "Who the fuck are you today?"

"You don't wanna know who I am, buddy. Get the frig out of my apartment, my country. Fuck off to your lovely wife and child. *Bai* [Go]!"

He shook his head, needing to cover his ears, not wanting to listen to the words delivered staccato, without emotion, yet each utterance felt like it was knifing into him, the lad's eyes those deep black pools again, when he remembered the laughing eyes from before, the come to bed eyes, the loving eyes, those persuasive eyes that had led him away from his marriage, his one certainty and now he had none. Dan slammed a fist into Lerm's cheek, catapulting him backwards, a hush descending as they both looked at each other, only sound the drip, drip of blood from his head wound, a

brief respite but after a just a beat the Thai's lips curled into an animalistic snarl.

Lerm leapt forward, weight toppling Dan to the floor, those large hands wrapped around his neck squeezing the life out of him, thinking back to the ruthlessness of the pythons in Bangkok Zoo, nose pressed up against that angel-devil tattoo, as if finally realising the significance. The tighter the grip, the more he faded, head lolling, thoughts shattering, though rearing back he got a last glimpse of those eyes, the hard stare of the street fighter, Lerm completely in the gutter, all the accoutrements just a big con, that smile was of the demon. Vision becoming tinged with black, fighting to breathe, he held onto that last thought, knowing this was life or death and sticking a trembling hand into his trouser pocket, Dan drew the knife plunging it handle deep into the lad's bulging biceps, Lerm stumbling back, a piercing scream filling his ears, the entire flat and he ran.

He charged out the living room, stumbling through the half-light down the hallway, bouncing off object d'art as he did so, things that had seemed from a museum on previous visits, from a more civilised existence, all part of the sham. Now he was fleeing for his life, breaths jagged, burning as he ripped open the front door, slammed it back shut, sprinting for the lift. Hands slippery, sticky with blood, his own, Lerm's, he jabbed furiously at the down button, all the while fixated on the front door, it swinging open, elevator simultaneously pinging and he jumped in, listening as the footsteps thundered down the corridor in pursuit but breathing out as the lift door shut, stomach lurching as it began its descent, face contorted in horror looking back at himself.

There was a video embedded in the message from Thai_truth-seeker, no words but Dan realised they weren't needed, heart pounding as the grainy image unfolded, clearly a man

walking along a beach holding what looked like a hammer in his right hand, tingle going from the tips of his toes to the top of his head yet the film cut out after just seconds. He stabbed a finger at the screen again, watching it over and over as though it could tell him anything new and though it couldn't, one thing was clear it wasn't one of the fishermen, too thick-set, even from the distance it was filmed at. It was dark, though the figure was backlit by one of those ornate lamps he remembered from the island, that bloody beach, forming a tantalisingly bulky silhouette.

"Mahogany Joe," he said to himself, rolling the name over his tongue, knowing from Debs that the Englishman had made a name for himself as some kind of boxing champ on Coconut Island initially before finding drugs, a "big lad" according to her.

Staring at the image again, it was obvious the man was too tall and chunky to be a Thai, it had to be a foreigner, didn't it? And if he confronted the fucker with the clip then he'd have to fess up. He pumped his fist, knowing he was on the verge of finding the truth, allowing a smile to spread over his face. Neurotically looking behind himself but having put sufficient distance between himself and the apartment, sidling into Bangkok's night-time shadows, there was no sign of Lerm, nothing to stop him now and he patted for the knife in his pocket, determined not to let anything else get in his way.

Stemming the still-leaking head wound with his handkerchief, he continued past the deserted, desecrated former camp of the Red Shirts, General Chin having announced their defeat in a televised address. Like an ideology could be defeated, as if hatred could be wiped out at the end of a gun, he thought, knowing the deaths of the protesters had been as ruthlessly covered up as that of Billy Boy and Corrine. Amazing Thailand very much open for business, thanks to the Chinless Wonder, friend of the dishonourable minister of vice Mr Gip and his special adviser Von Eil. What a bunch, yet they always seemed to come up smiling. How he'd love to

knock the smiles off their bloody faces, but he had other priorities.

Walking down Wireless Road, he chuckled to himself as he passed the sprawling home of the US ambassador, imagining he'd heard the flat crack of gunshots as the protesters were felled while he was enjoying drinks on the lawn with local dignitaries. The world always looked the other way as the jackboot was stamped in the face of the oppressed, allowing these bloody travesties to bloom. Uploading the video image to FB under the headline, "Does this look like a fisherman?", he hoped in some miniscule way he could redress the balance.

He observed the finely sculpted gardens of the exclusive apartments of the Lang Suan district, sweating workers toiling away in the heat to make the grounds beautiful for the unseen luxuriating in air-conditioned cool behind the chrome and glass. Just seeing them suffer made him feel savage, balling hands into fists, checking his phone again to make sure he had the right address but knowing instinctively he was in the correct place, Som preparing to rub his nose in it a final time. One worker was diligently attending to a hedge bordering a sweeping path as he made for the entrance, the man's dark, withered face wrenched away from the sun but there was no escaping its broiling intensity and it made Dan think of the fishermen, their prematurely aged, weathered faces, imagining young but vacant eyes looking out of prison bars and he increased his step, knowing he didn't have long left, that they didn't have long. Patting the worker gently on the back, the man offered a genuine smile, that innocent, open smile that enchanted him about this place, and he knew he had to run towards danger for once, take responsibility, which was why he'd come here too. Even if it was to defend the indefensible, at least he was fronting it up.

He was about to press the bell adjacent to the shiny apartment door, everything slick, smell of newness in the air, but it had already swung open, like she'd been waiting, as if

wanting this over as quickly as he did. Dan took her in, seeing it wasn't just the apartment that was slick and new, his soon to be ex dressed impeccably in a trouser suit that accentuated her modest curves, hair immaculate in a tight bob, faint smile on her glossed lips but not the one the worker just shot him, feeling neither genuine nor innocent, the other side of the Thai coin. He responded and went in for an awkward embrace that was fumbled away. Dan could see she'd judged what he was wearing with just a look and followed in silence as she turned back inside, sinking into the luxurious rug elegantly splayed across the vast hallway, feeling he should've taken his shoes off, those filthy shoes ruined with all he'd been through.

She led him into a living space, it spotless and vast compared to the filthy little box they'd rattled around in, place smelling of just done laundry and freshly baked bread, a home help looking up from an ironing board in the corner, nodding. Jesus, he thought shaking his head, he was intruding on the perfect life, perching precariously on the bone white sofa for fear of soiling it given where his clothes had been, his mind, hoping the blood-caked wound wouldn't give him away. The only evidence of a child was a toy car on the floor, and he realised he was aching for the lad, wondering where he was, the boy's absence as if he couldn't be trusted to see his own kid.

"Where's Max, my son?" he said, wincing as it came out more territorially than he expected, wanting to keep this civil and failing at the first, as she plonked down a plain glass of water in front of him, glad he'd loaded up already but not wanting to breathe out too heavily for fear of polluting the place.

"Max is at school. St Andrew's. It's perfect, just down the road. His teacher says he's very bright but..."

"St Andrew's? This place. Wow, you're doing so well without me."

"Dan, we could've died, burned to death. Mum promised

to take care of us. That's what family's for."

"I know, I know," he said, shifting uncomfortably as each word cut through him, wringing his hands, dying for a fag, another swig.

"Are you okay? I mean, really okay? You don't look... well, you know what I mean," she said, placing that slender hand gently on top of his.

"Som, I'm not. I know you left me, though I'd already quit the marriage because I was living a bloody lie. That doesn't stop me loving you and Max, it's just different. It won't be like before, but I so want to be part of your lives, both of you. I've got to go back to Coconut Island, find out the truth, save those fishermen, get justice for Bill, Corrine and I don't know if I'll make it but you have to believe. Save a place for me here, always, then at least I know you're both with me wherever I end up," he said, touching his heart, fat tears plopping into his lap and as he dared to look up, he saw she was crying too, Som reaching across the inconsequential but somehow massive divide between them, hugging him hard, a long time before she let go.

There was nothing left to say as he got up quietly from the sofa, feeling elated. No matter what happened, they were on his side, giving him the strength for what he needed to do next, accepting his responsibilities. This was a different Dan.

Chapter 22

He drummed his fingers on the table, shuffling his feet but sat on his usual perch in Wong's, overlooking his burnt out flat, windows obliterated, exterior charred and blackened, reminder of another escape from the dead, the journey he'd been on just to get to this point. It felt like fate, karma, all those things rolled into one as he let the cold beer slide down his throat, needing some Dutch courage in his belly, clock ticking to the night train to Surat Thani, which sounded like some kind of gritty Wong Kar-wai thriller and his date with a certain Mahogany Joe, name out of a penny dreadful. As the guvnor looked over from his station at the bar Dan sensed he knew better than to say anything, that linen-suited reporter from the BBC hovering on screen above them like an apparition, outside the Monkey House, which was just a cab ride away but felt like a million miles. He bit the inside of his cheek as those rounded vowels cut through the silence, dropping like lead weights; the two fishermen having lost their final appeal for the Coconut Island "slayings" and had just "days to live". A last plea for clemency would go to the King, but he "barely intervened", continued the correspondent with his perfect hair, gently tanned skin, informing the world impassively that the pair could be dead within "seventy-two hours".

"Fuck," he said aloud, tuning out the rest of the report, imagining the two boys' mums, their faces locked in that agonised expression, thinking of Debs too, Bill and Corrine. He signalled for another beer, ripping his phone out of his pocket, frantically responding to Thai_truthseeker, telling him he'd be on Coconut Island in the next forty-eight hours, the keyboard warrior having revealed his whereabouts in his

final message. But he'd been hoping not to revisit that ghoulish place, shoulders slumping, whole body gripped by a heaviness, a dark, ominous image in his head of that beach, what had happened there because he knew if he returned it would be coming for him. No, lighting up a fag, dragging the smoke deep down, it was all about getting Joe to confess first, then it could all be neatly tied up, explained, nothing to do with spirits or conspiracies, just a two-bit drug dealer cum junkie taking out his frustrations on a pair of wide-eyed youngsters whose only transgression was to be in the wrong place at the wrong bugging time.

He looked at his ringing phone – Lerm – but he cut the call. Dan knew he was finally on his own, not reliant on anyone else for a change, couldn't blame another person for his failings but he smiled, the first genuinely happy moment he'd had for a long time as he knew being solo was the only way he was going to get through the next few hours, days, all part of getting the job done. Distractions, including his own nagging fears that kept him constantly wired, were the one thing he couldn't afford, thinking of the disasters that'd befallen him, hardly a set of coincidences but patting at the knife in his pocket, no longer prepared to let anyone get in his way.

“Are you okay, man? You look happy for once, but happy in a kind of determined way,” said the bar owner.

“I just know exactly where I'm going, what I'm doing, I have a bloody plan. It's a long time since I've been able to say that.”

“I know you've had it tough recently, your wife, the kid, that fire. You deserve some good news, you need to catch a break. I sense you're going a long way away from here, please promise you'll be careful. There'll be a couple of cold ones on the house on your return, my man.”

“Cheers to that,” he said.

The lights flickered on, waking him out of his slumber, Dan listening to the rattling of the rails that lulled him to sleep last night, bottle of Thai whisky he'd polished off acting like an anaesthetic. That was the then and as he slid from his bunk, this was the now, sun streaming through the window like a collision, putting a shaky hand to his thumping head, the familiar rush of thoughts, offering a shy smile to his backpacker bunk mate below who'd helped him out with the booze, hoping he hadn't revealed too much. He'd played the part of a traveller too, wishing with all his being he could inhabit that innocent role convincingly again, forgetting what it felt like to have a head free of guilt, ability to smile genuinely at the world.

"Morning, mate. How's the head? Amazing Thailand," the backpacker said, pointing out the window as the lush green rice paddies rolled by, occasionally punctuated by the golden stupas of temples, like a spread in National Geographic.

"Yeah," Dan mumbled, but he knew once that innocence had gone, there was no going back, he couldn't look through those eyes again.

He silently shook his head as the bonhomie of last night foundered on his own inability to get excited about anything anymore, looking around the rest of the carriage, similar faces to the lad in front of him, eyes wide, hopeful smiles. They were being sold a lie but so what, really, many would never get to realise it, they weren't all Bill and Corrine, since the worst most suffered was a bit of Bangkok belly and being ripped off by a greasy fingered tuk tuk driver. But as he sloped to the end of the carriage, lit a cigarette and leaned out the open door, morning air in his face, a clattering in his ears, he felt the heat rising again, trembling as he huffed out a cloud of smoke because he knew the two of them had probably done exactly the same thing, had innocent intentions, they just wanted to have a good time but as he knew behind the palm trees and the dazzling smiles was a cesspit.

Arriving at Surat Thani pier he ducked due to the beating

rain, not that it stopped him getting an instant soaking, his tiny holdall of clothes slick with it as he blundered into an open-sided waiting room with the rest of the gaggle of backpackers. Putting a hand to his nose, it was the familiar fishy port smell, and he felt close to puking, while looking at the sea, a churning, boiling mess, didn't help, nor did the tout in his face.

"Koh Samui, Panghan, Tao!" he shouted.

Dan waved him away, but it was something about the eyes, remembering with a start he'd experienced it with Lerm, an expression that told him he wasn't registering, not taking no for an answer, completely hostile to what he probably considered dissent and the man loomed back at him, large hand lolling on his shoulder. He looked at the chipped nails, black underneath with all sorts of gunge, tasted the vomit in his throat again.

"What do you want?"

"*Farang*, it's not what I want. it's what you want. Man, you want some ganja, coke, E, *yaba*," he said, leaning into his ear.

"I don't want anything you're selling."

Even though the tout smiled widely, revealing a mouth of crooked, yellowing teeth, he bumped Dan in the chest so hard it sent him skidding backwards on the greasy floor, holdall plopping into an oil-slicked puddle. But seeing the altercation, a colleague of the man grabbed him from behind, cooed something in his ear, the tout launching a globule of phlegm in his direction before being hauled off. He looked around at the other Thai salesmen laughing and joking with the backpacker crowd, fistfuls of baht changing hands, onward travel being sorted, and he wondered whether it was him. Through his prematurely aged, cynical eyes, they looked like mafia, and he felt himself being viewed back in an equally suspicious way. Taking a different tack, he approached an older woman, an aunty type, though the way she stood, legs firmly apart, the crease on her brow indicated she was all business.

“I need a boat to Panghan,” he said, arms open wide.

“Slow or fast?”

“Fast, but do speedboats go in this weather?”

“You pay, you go. Fifteen-hundred baht.”

He looked out at the roiling sea but knew he had to get there for the fishermen, time ticking away, thrusting a hand in his pocket, peeling off some damp notes as she waved over to her colleagues to signal she'd caught one. The tout from earlier approached, slamming a triumphant hand across his shoulder, like through some grotesque trick he'd ended up with the fucker anyway, the man whistling as he guided him to the boat bobbing around like a cork. The name stencilled on the side – Red Shark – said it all, the bastard that wanted to kill him seconds ago, now happy to take his money. About to get on the boat, he thought back to his last little ocean sojourn, but he didn't have time to debate it, no time to question whether he'd be bashed over the head with a wrench when they were a suitable distance from shore and heaved over the side. No, he stepped on deck, a deck sloshing with water, Smiler slinging a filthy lifejacket at him as he took the wheel, another man aft wrestling with the engine that at last burst into life. He breathed out, grabbed his bag closer to him, but he no longer felt fear, knowing this was the right thing whatever happened, even Som and Max said they were with him and he smiled. Maybe it was even for real.

He staggered to his feet as the boat reached the relative calm of the island's waters, stomach emptied of its contents in the rollercoaster ride of earlier, the tout who'd doubled as the boat's skipper watching on with a sick grin as he'd puked. Dan chucked the life vest to the oily floor as the engine slowed, now in the lee of the land but the man was still giving him the eye, not the first time in the last few weeks he sensed someone wanted to kill him. All he could do was look away. The weather had abated at least, sky now a purple hue, civilisation looming into view, fairy lights strewn across the bars of Rin beach, brown bodies dancing in the sand and he could

see the allure, got it completely. Why wouldn't you want to live this bloody fantasy?

They stopped some distance from the shore, the skipper cutting the engine, the boom of the music clearly audible from the nearby beach bars, though looking over the side into the inky dark he calculated it was still too deep to wade ashore. Without breaking his stare, the man came at him with those big outstretched arms, flung him from the side of the boat, a splash, then it all going quiet, muffled, a blackness, struggling under water back to the surface, bag landing next to him with another plop, mind going back to days ago, the skull masks, those vile images but he had to forget, no bloody distractions. Completely back in the now, the engine starting up again boomed into his ears, noise getting louder and louder behind him, wrenching his head around with the white prow slicing closer and closer, whole vision filling with the dazzle of the boat, until at the very last second it veered off, thinking he could hear the man's laughter, coughing up the wake from the receding propeller. He and boats didn't go, they really bloody didn't, but it was called having no choice.

He stumbled onto the sand, breathless, shaking, aping some pathetic shipwreck victim, trailing his sodden bag. Aware the eyes of the backpackers were on him, Dan gave a gawky kind of shrug, but they merely went back to chugging from buckets and smoking spliffs, like if he couldn't provide anything other than a laugh, he was no longer of interest. It was as if they all belonged, felt perfectly right where they were, doing what they were doing, yet Dan trudged awkwardly along the beach, lacking any sense of purpose, having absolutely no clue where he was.

"Singha, please," he said to the barman in the very first watering hole he came to, speaking the universal language.

"You just been for a dip, mate?"

He just shook his head, chucking some notes onto the counter but thinking the Thai sounded more sarf London than Southeast Asia, probably on account of all the bloody Brits,

the Gap Yahs' mockney rubbing off, wannabe gangsters trying new personas for size because who was going to question it. You could be pretty much anything here, so apt for running away and starting over, and he thought of Mahogany Joe, knowing he couldn't just mutely sip his beer, wish all his problems away.

"Listen," he said, leaning into the barman's ear. "Where can I get magic mushrooms?"

"You just got here and you're asking me that. Player."

"I need to know," he said, placing two five-hundred baht notes down on the counter, knowing Joe was well connected, that he'd be where the drugs were.

No sooner than the money was there, it was gone, like a magic trick. "Mate, you see that cliff, at the very top is the Buddha Bar. Be lucky, yeah."

He could see the lights from the place gleaming, though the blank stares from some of the young travellers passing in the opposite direction, wending their way down the cliff path from the bar, were more Night of the Living Dead than Shiny Happy People, those dead eyes he'd remembered from Coconut Island. It was that thing about getting anything you wanted as long as you paid, everything was laid on and provided you didn't step out of line or tread on the wrong person's toes, you were fine. But what happened when you went off piste? He needed to find out as he continued up the path, wiping his brow, batting away the mosquitoes, wondering at the spirits, shivering as a gust of wind blew his way but gritting his teeth, putting one foot in front of the other.

He surveyed his own bedraggled clothes before entering the bar, clashing with the hippy chic, white singlets and board shorts for the bronzed boys, floaty dresses and bangles for the tanned girls, both often accessorised with cornrows and/or henna tattoos. Dan laughed to himself, knowing the latter would be instantly ditched on departure. That's how committed to it they were, he thought, lighting up another of his cheapo fags, polluting the place with his whole being. But he

didn't really appear on anyone's radar, most of the clientele laid back on beanbags looking up at the stars like it was an engrossing telly programme. Approaching the bar, he got the regulation smile from the woman behind it, though it disappeared the second she clocked his attire, cloak of invisibility long gone, desperation written all over his face.

"One, where's Mahogany Joe, two, where can I get magic mushrooms?" he said in a low growl, dispensing with pleasantries, didn't have time.

"One, I've no idea, two, they're five-hundred baht."

He laid down another note, she filled a beaker from some kind of flask, and he clutched the supposed magic mushroom shake, easing down into a comfy deckchair on the edge of the cliff, twinkly lights of Rin beach arrayed far below, fishing boats bobbing about way off to sea. Taking his first sip, he grimaced, but rather than leaving it alone, Dan swallowed back the rest of the rancid brew, a smile spreading over his face, view morphing into something of filmic quality, widescreen, vivid colours. And he sat back, eased into the chair as though it was part of him, viewing the world through a kaleidoscope, sounds around him softening, buffed at the edges.

"Bruv, I hear you're looking for a Mahogany Joe?"

"What... how?" he said, as though awoken from a long, dream-laden nap, not sure how long he'd been like it, looking at the *farang* sitting opposite, a beefy hand gently resting on his knee, sovereign rings providing that hint of menace, cutting through the blissed-out vibe. "Who are you?"

"Bro, more to the point, who the bleep are you? State of ya. Listen, I'm a mate of Joe's. Any mate of his is a mate of mine, if you know what I mean. But what're your credentials?"

"Cree-den-shalls?" he slurred, stalling for time, trying to sound plausible through the drug haze but looking at the lad's buzz cut, muscly neck, those rings, whole body coiled with a manic kind of energy, ain't no hippy. "Do I need bloody

credentials? I'm a reporter. I think he might know something about the killing of Bill and Corrine..."

"Shhh, are you a complete fruit and nut? You can't talk about that 'ere. I can take you to 'im."

"What's in it for you?"

"As I said, any friend of 'is is a friend of mine."

"I'm not his friend."

"Just a saying, you daft bastard," he said, getting Dan in a headlock, dragging him out the bar, drowning out the music with his mad laughter.

He managed to wrestle free, the lad stomping further up the hill, waving him to follow deeper into the treeline. Dan shook his head because before he would've run back down to the beach, every inkling telling him that was the right thing, the safe thing, but he'd come too far to choose safe. He continued following, even though his head was whirling with the drugs, jungle as if dancing around, horribly bright, shiny material of the lad's Crystal Palace top acting as a beacon as he weaved expertly in and out of the foliage like he'd obviously done countless times. This wasn't his first bloody rodeo.

The rudimentary path meandered like the boy, one way, then the other, Dan feeling motion sick as they dodged around, hum of cicadas in his ears like this is where the natural world started and the party ended, far from the chilled ambience of the beachside places, a grisly kind of wild aura coming down, the one he'd felt on that other island not so long ago, hugging his body to stop himself shaking as he continued to track that hefty back in the garishly red and blue striped football top, the whole scene seeming to pulse as the buzz from the mushrooms gripped. All he could hear was his own laboured breaths, the trampling of his feet as he finally caught up with twinkle toes in a clearing, the boy leaning smilingly up against a shack, teeth dazzling him, zeroing in on the tan, that ridiculously deep tan.

"You better come in."

“Where’s Mahogany Joe?” he said, voice wavering as he looked at the place shrouded in darkness.

“What d’you think?” he said, turning around with a wink, smiling again as he made his way up the creaky steps.

When he stepped inside, a paraffin lamp had already been lit, flame flickering off the walls, giving Joe’s face a ghoulish glow, but it was the frame, that bulky frame silhouetted in the lamplight, that caused the sweat to coat his brow. Shakily sitting opposite his heart was racing, walls seeming to close in, claustrophobia gnawing, desperately wanting to come down from the high, gratefully grabbing the lukewarm beer thrust at him, words stuck in his parched throat.

“Bruv, you look like you’ve seen a ghost. You don’t believe in ‘em, do ya? Most of the Thais do. Spirits and all that,” said Joe.

He was shaking his head but rapt by an image outside the window, the ghostly figure of Corrine that had visited him the other night. Dan closed his eyes as tight as he could, rocking back and forth but he couldn’t dislodge it, the hair lank and matted with blood, the hand reaching out as if to take him with her, maybe trying to tell him something. Opening his eyes again, still unable to find words, he exhaled, she was gone, Joe holding a spliff out to him but all he could see now was the video clip, the hammer, that stocky figure.

“You’ve been on the ‘shrooms. You see all sorts of shite. Having a bad trip? Smoke some of that, take a sip of beer, sorted. Rubs the edge right off.”

“This is why I’m here. Tell me that doesn’t look like you?” he said finally, sticking the phone in Joe’s face with a shaky hand, clip on a permanent loop.

“I fucking save you from a bad trip, offer you my hospital-ity, a cold one and a spliff and you wanna fit me up. Yeah, typical journo. I hate journalist scum. That’s one of the reasons I did a Lord Lucan. Disappeared, didn’t I? Don’t need the hassle, me. I read your stuff online, thought you might be different.”

He took a long toke of the joint, got to his feet, put the phone right under Joe's nose, no time to debate, the needing to know taking away the fear. "Have a good bloody look."

"I admire your front, I'll give you that, bro. Not many people have the balls. I know why I'm in the frame. Bill scored drugs off me, yeah. I was after Corrine, good looking piece, but he came on to me. I'm not that way, so I gave the boy a hiding."

"That's not what I'm asking. Tell me that's not you, that you didn't do it. Take a good bloody look!" shouted Dan, fingers digging into that muscly neck as he angled Joe's head down towards the screen, replaying it over and over.

"I may 'ave done, I may not. I dunno. I was high meself."

"So you might've put a rock through some beautiful young lad's temple, then you raped his achingly pretty friend, choked the life out of her, but then again you might not have done. Like you wouldn't flaming know."

"Life gets blurry sometimes."

"Bullshit. If you did that, you'd know all about it. And from what I've heard far from coming onto you, Bill was trying to protect his friend. Friends, not a concept you'd bloody know anything about. Besides, me and him are sisters, and I can't see what he'd find attractive about you."

"Oh, get her. So you're one of them an' all," said Joe, laughing now, red in the face laughing, sound filling the space, as if the walls were shaking.

It was like this scumbag was just revelling in the notoriety, wanted to be known for something, anything, even it was murder, the cult of celebrity gone mad, needing his fifteen minutes no matter what it took to get there – reality TV, social media, murder. He wound up, then with all his weight transferred to the front foot sent a fist slamming into Joe's face, a bone-crunching crack, laughter stopping abruptly as he slumped to the floor out cold, just the hissing of the paraffin lamp, the cheep of the cicadas.

He looked around the room again, as if it could possibly

offer up any clues, then he saw it, the skull mask pinned to the bloody headboard. How the hell had he missed it? Cursing the mushrooms, the drug haze, he ripped it from the wall, the thing feeling leathery in his hands like a second skin, staring into the vacant black pools for eyes, doubting himself again, thinking back to the ghoul on the motorbike, the two fuckers on the speedboat but then he looked at the lump on the floor, meathead lolling about dazed and his shoulders slumped. He couldn't see Mahogany Joe being sophisticated enough to hunt him down, let alone cover up two murders. No, this was just some loser drug dealer that'd been run out of town, wasn't it? Dan rifled through some drawers, thinking of all the backpackers this sicko had ripped off, justifying it to himself like he was some Robin Hood figure, heart booming in his chest as Joe groaned, pocketing the small stash of notes he'd found stuffed away, calculating it could at least keep him afloat for another day or two.

Crumpling the mask up in his fist, he sighed as he exited the shack. One down, one to go, he thought, a final act pending in the only place he knew could answer his questions, desperately calculating how long he had left to save the fishermen, find the truth for Bill and Corrine, Debs, a tingle going through him as he knew it meant returning to Coconut Island. Days were becoming hours. He took out his phone, messaged Thai_truthseeker, finally confirming that meet. Then he sent a text to Lerm to let him know where he was going, needing to test a theory, the one that says whenever bad stuff happens he's not far away. This was the new Dan Young, not only bloody running towards danger but amping it up.

Chapter 23

“Danny, please stay away from Koh Maphraw. You don’t need to get involved,” said Lerm.

Dan listened to the words in silence, stabbing at the screen, cutting the call with one tap. It’d been delivered with that sweet caress of his, the devious charm that’d taken him in from the get-go, that night on the beach and he so wanted it to be true, felt it with the ache in his gut, then thinking how it all jarred completely with that night of darkness, evil in Bangkok. He remembered that mad shine to the bastard’s eyes that betrayed a murderous hatred, knowing what would’ve happened if the lift doors hadn’t closed when they did.

Turning one way, then the other, he surveyed the crowd at the port, relieved other than the odd “Where you go?” that no one seemed interested in him. Then again, being the most dishevelled looking *farang* between here and Bangkok, with his worldly possessions stuffed into a battered holdall, he knew he hardly looked like a catch. The one plus was last night’s storm had passed, fierce sun beating down on a sea the consistency of hammered steel, though he felt each tick of the clock on the wall spearing through him, calculating he had a day to save the fishermen, just twenty-four bloody hours. He patted his pocket, slightly weightier than it should’ve been given Joe’s unconscious contribution, Dan thought chuckling to himself, approaching one of the touts advertising “speedboat”.

He cowered from the sun’s relentless heat under the boat’s awning, but a chill inexplicably shot through him as Coconut Island came clearly into view. Tuning out the excited chatter of the youngsters surrounding him, that innocent expectation

lost to him forever, realising as the engine droned in his ears, boat getting closer and closer to his final destination, that there were a lot of missteps to him losing that innocence but the last act had been his first visit here. Dan thought of that initial meeting with Lerm, supposedly a coincidence, Peeklong warning him about having unleashed the spirits but it was Monroe's words that were rattling round his head as he continued to tremble with cold – at least figuratively it was a place of constant night, where the darkness had swallowed the sun. And a jolt went through him as he wondered what'd happened to the old fucker, like he'd disappeared into that impenetrable blackness too.

The water looked opaque as they glided towards the shore, Dan daring to peer around the headland, imagining Bill lying there with that black ravine bisecting his forehead, Corrine a waterlogged, desecrated husk, crimson matted hair clashing horribly with translucent skin. A man was speaking into his face, but it was as though he was in a daze, unable to take the words in, the Thai pointing at the sea. Numbly he jumped into the knee-deep surf, speedboat zipping off with an impatient roar as he lumbered up the sand, the always relentless thud of music coming from Coco Bananas, sun glinting off the shades of the beautiful young things sat on the veranda, the party that never stopped. He imagined Von Eil in the darkened bowels of the place, looking at that bank of screens, every warm body another stack of dollars, thoughts of that sicko rousing him. The Yank must've seen the image, the grainy ghoul holding the hammer, the very night of the murder, and it was like he embodied everything that was screwed about the place, simply the fact he was quite willing to see two innocent men die. With a shudder, he thought back to the anonymous black silhouette on the clip, as untraceable as a shadow, there one minute, gone the next.

There were only a few casualties dotted about on the beach, either mad dogs catching some early rays or sleeping off the night before. It was as though he was slipping in

undetected, wending his way through the thin strip of jungle, eyes adjusting to the gloom, passing the burnt-out resort he remembered from before, what was left of the beach bungalows twisted and charred as if some ominous warning, wondering as ever what'd really happened, what was the story, always so many different ways of looking at things here, the most plausible answer also being the least likely. He was learning, he thought with a smile, knowing he needed to look at life through a different lens, that's how he'd get to the truth.

The glare hit him again as soon as he exited the treeline, spitting out the dust that was being swirled around the rutted track of a road leading into town, looking up at the mess of cables sagging down just above his head, sewage stink on the air, infrastructure bursting, yet Amazing Thailand didn't want to turn anyone away, dent the goldrush, General Chin and his cronies like Mr Gip too heavily invested. He pulled his baseball cap tighter over his forehead, pushed the sunglasses up his greasy nose, fearing bumping into the likes of Peeklong, knowing he couldn't afford any more hold-ups.

"Can I have your passport, please," said the man from the bike hire, looking him up and down.

He shook his head, laid down more money than he needed to, it seeming to do the trick as the Thai shrugged, but he was pointed to the most dilapidated looking motorbike. It was like they knew he couldn't get far anyway, where was there to go on this bloody island, thought Dan. There was no getting off if you were wanted, the resident mafia would see to that and should you transgress there was a price to be paid, which would be extracted no matter what.

Twisting the ignition, the thing spluttered into life and turning an unsteady hand on the throttle he lurched off. The lumpy road vibrated through his very being but it was his head that hurt because he knew exactly where he was going, he'd suggested it. Thai_truthseeker insisted on somewhere out of the way, where they wouldn't be expected, unseen.

Where better than a temple that'd been deserted due to the fear it was haunted by two white ghosts but Dan's body was wracked by shivers as he clung desperately to the handlebars, knowing the truth was in reach, fearing it, like he'd waited so long he wasn't sure he wanted to know, concerned what it might actually mean.

He stopped the bike, dragged it behind a withered hedge so it wouldn't be visible from the road, not that there was any traffic, place feeling like the ends of the Earth. A breeze was blowing the dust around in whirls, but the undulating track was empty in either direction, jungle an impenetrable blackness behind the tumbledown temple. Dan entered through the same rickety door as he'd done several weeks ago, the trip he made to ensure he fulfilled his pledge to find the truth, so it was only right the big reveal happened here, if this wasn't all some elaborate hoax, another trap.

There was a dread silence, sun high in the sky but it didn't penetrate here, couldn't pierce the canopy of the jungle that seemed to be taking over, squeezing the very life out of the sagging walls, the temple itself, unloved and left to rot. He was nearly gagging from the smell and, looking around, under some browning hedges that bordered the wall he saw the putrid corpses of cats that had gone unfed and were themselves being feasted on by clouds of bluebottles. The flies brought him back to Bill, that forehead, though he heard a mewling from behind and turning around refocused on an emaciated feline, skeletal, as if waiting to die, further unnerving him, place of worship now very much a place of death.

He fiddled with his phone, no word from his date, already ten minutes late, worried he'd been stood up or worse. Unable to sit still for long, he rose from the little crumbling concrete bench, all senses on alert as the breeze shot through some wind chimes, tinkling them but as he touched the bells on the branch above the rust came off in great flakes, as if everything here had been left to ruin. Rattling open the door that led into the innards of the temple, he thought back to his first visit,

when Peeklong had wrenched away the sacking, the day his innocence finally died and he was back there again as the stench entered his nostrils, shining his torch on the very table where they'd lain, Bill and Corrine, awful browning stain where the remaining fluids had leaked out of those young bodies, way too young to have been lying there. Shaking his head, through the stone walls he heard the vibration of a motorbike engine that stopped abruptly, someone having drawn up and parked, feeling a desperate pulsing in his ears and he ran outside. A figure was walking towards him, though with each laborious step they edged up the visor of their helmet.

"No bloody way," he said, recognising the craggy face, yellowing teeth, remembering their conversation in Splash before he'd been spirited away, Monroe's eyes meeting his.

"Bet you didn't expect to see me again, love. Thought I was one of the bad guys cos I couldn't tell you anything. I know 'ow you think. Journalists always a cynical lot. Don't lose that edge, as I said before everyone needs an angle."

"So, Thai_truthseeker..."

"Babes, let's cut the shit. I didn't come 'ere to have a conversation. Neither did you. This is what you came to see," he said, shoving his phone into Dan's hand.

He was gripped as the video clip unfolded, a clearer image than before, a man cornering another on the beach at night-time with a hammer, area lit by a single spotlight, as if the perpetrator actually wanted to see what he was doing but it also meant he could be seen, though maybe he didn't bloody care, like he was untouchable.

"What the..."

"Look fucking closely," said Monroe.

His hand was shaking, but he was watching as the hammer rose and fell, over and over and over, blood splattering in great clouds as Bill's once beautiful face was pummelled with an unending ferocity but then he saw it and Dan's knees buckled, flailing on the floor as he vomited again and again.

Monroe was saying something, but he filtered it out and closing his eyes all he could see was not the hammer going like a piston but the perpetrator's muscly neck caught pulsing in the light, a tingle coursing through him at the vile clarity of that angel-devil tattoo, how the boy once he was done turned and smiled as if he knew, Lerm looking defiantly straight down the camera lens, then turning ominously to pursue a blonde figure lingering at the edge of the frame.

"No! It can't be!" he screamed, though his rage was met by an indifferent silence, still unable to find the energy to drag himself off the ground but he grabbed at Monroe's outstretched hand, the old man pulling him towards the concrete bench, throwing an arm around his shoulder.

"I knew there was an old, deserted resort on that stretch of beach, which explains the spotlight. Handy, eh? Somehow the security camera still had film in it. The other video I pinched from Coco Bananas, though coverage didn't go all the way to the death site, and I had to know."

"Why Lerm? Why? What can he possibly have against those two... those two beautiful, innocent youngsters with everything to live for. I dunno, the world's not fair but how can it be that dark, evil?" said Dan, voice cracking.

"Love, listen," said Monroe, putting a hand on his knee to still the trembles. "I don't have all the answers. I was on the payroll at Coco Bananas. I think Lerm works for Von Eil, they're somehow connected. It's up to someone else to join the dots, but I know I couldn't live with meself if those two lovelies, the fishermen, flamin' die, and getting my hands on the video was my insurance. I couldn't leave anything to chance. I had to see you face to face, but it's up to you now."

"Where will you go?"

"Like I should've done long ago, away from this damn place, a long, long way away. I thought this was 'ome but evil lives here, you can feel it. Listen, take that phone, the images, do what you must. Love, good luck," said Monroe, handing him back the mobile, squeezing his arm.

He watched on from his vantage point on the bench as the old man sprinted for the exit, belying his age as if it underlined the gravity of the situation, listened as the motorbike engine blasted into life, his mind selecting those sick images from the phone on repeat. Dan thought of the way Lerm had looked at him, the smile that completely took his breath away, completely took him in, charmed him into leaving his family, the way he'd virtually caressed his ear with the words "I love you" and then how it had all changed in a heartbeat, expression hardening, eyes going blank, once soothing hands curling into murderous fists and it was like he had no idea who, or more aptly, what he was dealing with.

Dan got to work immediately with the phone, emailing the video clip to Liffa at the Daily with the briefest of explanations, knowing the images would speak for themselves, aware that not even the old Aussie fucker – who'd proved previously he had balls the size of walnuts – could turn down this world bloody exclusive. He smiled, knowing it'd have his name on it, yep, Dan Young back from the dead, a resurrected byline. Opening his Facebook account and under the headline, "The real Thai backpacker killer", he attached the file featuring the damning video, punching the air as he did so but an ache gripped his gut and he felt a leaden weight across his shoulders as he knew to properly avenge their deaths, like he'd pledged, he had to deal with Lerm. He wasn't done, not by a long way, in fact he knew this was just the beginning and as he stood slowly, tremulously from the bench, Von Eil came to mind, the grinning, immaculately dressed Yank with the bottomless resources and the friends in high places. What the hell did he have to do with all this?

Chapter 24

He checked into the reception at The Suites, gulping down the welcome drink, like the chilled glass of fruit punch was actually booze, knowing it wasn't but desperate for another hit. The receptionist merely smiled that enigmatic Thai smile, but Dan knew he was eyeing his ragged clothes, the tatty bag, though the hotel employee imperceptibly blinked as the card transaction went through, like all was suddenly right with the world. That was the difference between somewhere like Thailand and the UK, paying up simply meant no questions were asked, he thought, gratefully receiving his card back, saying a silent prayer to Som, his latest saviour, the difference between him sleeping on the beach.

As the porter showed him around his palatial villa, all marble floors and subdued lighting, it felt like he was taking the piss just a tad, since there was a gulf between being homeless and the luxury he'd chosen, but there was a reason. The Suites were part of the Coco Bananas empire, and he knew word would get back to Lerm. There was no way he'd be able to enjoy this extravagantly appointed sanctuary for long, at least not without company. After he'd been shown how to work the rainfall shower, the air con, he slipped a couple of notes in the lad's pocket, housekeeping discreetly slipping out the door, which clicked shut with a five-star hush. He flopped down on the bed, and it was like floating on air, but the ringing of the phone drilled through his head, realising as he picked up that the time for silence, contemplation, were now a long way off.

"Young Dan, is that you?"

"Frank, I haven't got time for a big debate. That's a world exclusive. Publish the bloody story," he said, imagining Liff

feet up on the desk, smoking furiously, scared shitless of upsetting some Thai thug, who was invariably part of the establishment.

“Mate, it’s done. Check the website, it’s up. World bugging exclusive. Too right. You beauty. I always knew you’d come up trumps, son.”

“Really? Frank, you finally found your balls. Congratulations. Just for today, we can call the Daily a real newspaper,” he said, laughter reverberating down the line before he cut the call, not wanting to listen to any more of the Aussie’s cheap putdowns, when he was the one who’d actually delivered.

He rattled open the door of a large bureau, having already reckoned this was the kind of pad that screamed booze, and he was a past master at sniffing it out, nodding vigorously, just what he liked to see, an absolutely stacked mini-bar. Pouring an extra large dose of Johnnie Walker Black, plonking in a couple of ice cubes from the recently filled bucket – what a bloody result – he swirled the Scotch around, took his first sip, luxuriated in the drink burning down his gullet, the taste of victory. He saluted himself in the mirror, lighting up another Falling Rain, still the cheapest fags money could buy but he had whisky, cigarettes and probably the comfiest bed he’d ever laid on, which came replete with a pillow menu, a bloody pillow menu! If that wasn’t cause for celebration, he didn’t know what was, but then the phone pinged. He looked around at the majesty of the room, though it didn’t provide any solace, the ping might just as well have been breaking glass, like the ticking of the doomsday clock getting closer and closer to midnight, nowhere left to run.

“Stay right where you are. It’s all been a big misunderstanding. It didn’t happen like what you saw on the video. Danny Boy, let me explain. Please!”

He banged the phone down. It was just like he imagined, Lerm’s text denying everything but lying’s what he did, their supposed relationship, for instance, just a great big porky, along with the sharp suits, opulent apartment, just all part of

the same ridiculously elaborate sham. Thinking of it he burned, heat pulsing off him, sensing his body ready to unleash, as if the pain of what'd happened, the desire for revenge banished all fear and he smiled because it was like some all-powerful drug, though the only thing that scared him was how strong it felt. He knew instinctively the fishermen were safe, cheering inside, imagining their smiling faces as the news was explained to them, the mums, tears nipping at his eyes but he swallowed them back, thinking of that vision of Corrine that'd come to him, the outstretched hand, knowing he still had to appease those restless spirits.

He'd finished the last of the whisky, thankful it was a half bottle this time – needing to be focused – smoked his umpteenth cigarette down to the filter, surveying the ashtray piled high with dog ends, peeking out of the curtain, flaming sun sinking into a sea that looked molten. The island was gearing up for another party but he was fixated on the view from the window, awaiting the coming darkness, knowing it would bring on the angel-devil, just like it had that very first night, but this time he was ready.

He slipped out the door, and if he hadn't felt any fear before, just leaving the cool of the air conditioning, the luxury of the four walls, jarred him, scythed through the whisky high. Inside was premier hotel world with its mini-bar, toiletries from L'Occitane and floating on air mattress but outside was down 'n' dirty Coconut Island, Dan already swatting the mosquitoes as the humidity saw the sweat leak from every orifice, while the thud of the music from the beach bars only mimicked the beating of his heart.

Stumbling around in the dark outside his villa, he eased himself into a bush opposite, one of those ornate plants you only saw in exclusive resorts that probably took on more water than a marathon runner and was a two-man job just to maintain. He sank back into its lushness, though there was an overpowering smell coming from just behind. Pushing on through to the other side was a stagnant pond that was

bubbling, the source of the smell, a putrid cesspool that the bush had concealed but nothing could disguise the stench of human shit. He felt sick as he turned back to view his villa, cowering on his haunches, in the shadows, just like he'd done that night in Phnom Penh outside Mr Bat Poo Cleaner's, the unholy Irishman, though this time he was the one waiting to pounce, tables turning.

He lit yet another fag, having seen couples, honeymooners most likely, go out to dinner, full of bonhomie, heard said couples return for sex or sleep, a horrible envy pricking at him. But the real nightlife was only beginning as the backpackers recovering from the previous day's hangovers – imagining Bill and Corrine having done much the same – started skipping their way to the bars, light of step, smiling, probably already preloaded with weed, booze. And if he envied the honeymooners, jealousy gripped him like a physical pain at these travellers, who literally glowed in the dark with youth, hope, imagining what it must feel like to have no responsibilities, a different bloody world no longer attainable to him, all having been so fleeting.

Soon even that flurry of activity died, only the sounds of the night-time jungle and the beat of the music from the bars reverberated through him. He'd never felt so lonely, but he knew he wasn't alone, the slight breeze setting him on edge like it did that very first night, sensing the spirits. Then, the displacement of the air above, a flapping of wings, bats swooping down out of the coal blackness, and he flailed his arms, but still they came. He knew he needed to stand his ground, allowing the creatures of the night to soar and then dive, soar and dive, backing further into the bush, waiting. That Thai saying came back to him – “Keep a cool heart” – having learned it was all about patience.

The snapping of vegetation underfoot was like a gunshot going off, the sound he'd been waiting for, and kneeling lower in the foliage, peering out, silhouetted on his villa's deck, was a figure that sent a tingle zapping through him. The

man was crouched down as he gazed in the windows, like he was scoping out his prey, creeping around like a hunter, gloved hands now moving to the doorknob, roughly pulling it back and forth, shaking his head. He wrenched round to survey the scene from the porch, the stalker as if sensing someone watching, like this was all practised, rehearsed. Dan's heart boomed in his chest and he felt for the knife in his pocket, the light catching the man's face revealing that unmistakably thick, tattooed neck.

A hammering of wings again, the black beast virtually in his face; he instinctively throwing his arms up, sending it flapping away. But looking back at the villa after the momentary distraction chilled him, deck empty, Lerm having disappeared off into the jungle's myriad shadows just like that. "Where the fuck is he?", were the words pounding through Dan's head, taking all his effort to keep still, listening with all his might, though it was just the drone of the music from the bars, the rustle of the trees, the more distant flap of the bats' wings. It told him nothing, and he stared again at the deck, wondering if it'd all been a bad dream, that he'd imagined it, though clenching his fist, this is why he was here, this is what he'd been waiting for.

The snap of another twig made him jump, body coiled, ready to run but the tap on the shoulder told him it was too late, waiting for the blow as he swivelled round, Lerm's mad eyes, like nothing he'd seen before or wanted to see again, zapping straight into his. There was a smile on his face, there always was, but nothing about him looked genuine, human even, and Dan tried to open his mouth, spit some words out, thinking he'd been ready for this, but nothing would come.

"After all the things I've done for you, saved your freakin' life, this is how you repay me."

"This is not about me!" he screamed, suddenly triggered, shoving Lerm so hard in the chest the lad was propelled through the bush, on the edge of the cesspool now, scrambling to get up, mud and shit having splattered all over his

typically immaculate clothes. “Why’d you do it? Why the fuck did you murder them, Bill and Corrine? Why?”

“He made me.”

“Lerm, you’re not making any sense,” he said, grabbing the boy’s arm.

“Todd. Von Eil...”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” he said, spittle showering his face they were so close, twisting the lad’s arm even tighter, wrenching it behind his back like he was going to break it.

“We’re together, me and Todd, an item but not like a normal couple. He owns me. I’m like a possession. I was a money boy before, a whore, a nothing. He educated me, I’m all bought and paid for like one of his commodities, now I owe. That night, Bill flirted with me, grabbed me, kissed me. Todd gets jealous, tried to get Billy thrown out, there was a fight, Corrine got involved. They wouldn’t leave.”

“And? *And?!?*” he shouted, shaking Lerm so hard he ripped his shirt wide open, buttons popping through the air.

“Todd lost face. He can never lose face. Instructed me to follow them out of the bar when they were done, finish them off. ‘Off them,’ he said, ‘Or we’re finished, dude, me and you’.”

Dan had buckled to his knees now, pawing pathetically at Lerm. “What about me? Where did I come into all this, this sick bloody joke?”

“I knew you were sniffing around, bud, looking for a story. I did my research...”

“Wait, this was all bloody planned? You did try to poison me that time, in your apartment with the flashy drink, you sick fuck,” he said, jumping up, back in the lad’s face.

“Todd told me to infiltrate your life. Throw you off the scent, like you were getting really warm. No one else gave a fuck about the freakin’ backpackers, the fishermen. But you were like a dog with a bone.”

“So drugging me, getting me to leave my wife and kid,

Som and Max, telling me you love me, that was *infiltrating* my life because Todd said. Todd told me to do this, Todd told me to do that. You know what you sound like, you fucking fake, a child. Everything about you's a lie," he said, fist hitting Lerm's jaw with a thud, the boy's head whiplashing.

The Thai was staggering around, but his eyes wouldn't leave Dan, defiant, like the punch was nothing. "I was acting at first, doing a job, but dude, Danny Boy, I fell in love. I'm in prison here with Todd, you were my out. You care, you..."

"Stop, I can't listen," he said, covering his ears, muffled sounds from Lerm's mouth, and he closed his eyes.

But then he felt pressure around his neck, could feel the boy's hot breath on his face, rough hands closing on his windpipe, those eyes that horror movie blank again. His vision was already going black, breaths constricted, body limp, the grip too strong, but a sound came from the other side of the bush, piercing through the pounding in his ears, two backpackers laughing their heads off after a night out, enough to distract Lerm, pressure momentarily weakening and he sent an elbow smashing into his ribs. Nose to nose now, Max and Som flashing briefly through Dan's head, Billy and Corrine, and with his remaining strength he pushed the Thai full in the chest, Lerm letting out a cry as he slipped down the bank, splashing into the sloppy brown pool.

"I can't swim!" he screamed.

He flailed his arms around in the oily filth, grabbing at the steep sides of the bank, but Dan slammed a boot down on his desperate fingers, and he bobbed back out to the middle, the deep. Lerm crazily windmilled his arms, though he couldn't keep his head above the ooze, taking longer and longer to emerge each time amid the sludge he was trying to expel with crazy, whirling coughs until he didn't come back up. A raft of bubbles floated to the surface instead, then an awful stillness.

Chapter 25

He closed his eyes, willed himself to think of the image of the girl, Corrine, with the translucent skin, the matted hair, but nothing would come, hoping she'd slunk away, finally found peace. It was a way of legitimising what had just happened, what he'd just done, but he knew nothing could really justify that as he put one trembly leg in front of the other. Turning from the cesspool, the tension pulsed through his body, half expecting a tap on his shoulder, Lerm about to berate him again but instead there was a silence more complete than he'd ever know, like it was the end of the world. Frenetically rubbing his eyes to stop the seemingly endless tears, there was no choice but to carry on, though cutting through the numbed shock were snatches of what'd just happened, how he threw a man that couldn't swim into a shit-filled swamp. Shaking his head, he knew there were no mitigating circumstances, though he also realised there were more answers to unearth. He imagined they'd find the Thai lad bloated, disfigured, skin a milky pale in a few hours after the body floated back to the surface, and he wobbled, having to hold himself up against a tree. In a few hours he'd be a wanted man, if he wasn't already.

It was a short walk from The Suites to Coco Bananas, getting late now but the music had gone up a notch, the veranda absolutely rammed, backpackers in the usual huddle around buckets of booze, air thick with marijuana, atmosphere carrying that typical Coconut Island menace, at least to Dan. The air crackled with a manic kind of energy like it was the last party but to the smiling travellers, bopping in the aisles, dancing shoeless in the sand, he expected nothing could be further from their minds, though he'd seen behind the curtain,

the whole place as rotten as the cesspool where he murdered Lerm. Yes, murdered, no other word for it, the bald bloody facts, whole body still shaking.

He entered the bar area, remembering how it used to look so glitzy, exuded a kind of glamour but looking closer he couldn't help but feel despite the glitter, it was all getting a little tatty, jaded, like the party was almost over. Maybe Von Eil had seen it all coming, he thought, like the backpacker killings snagged the finely tuned workings of the place, laid them bare. Approaching the bar, meathead seemed to clock him, though like a shadow briefly passing the sun his snarl soon turned to a smile, furnishing him with the whisky soda he'd asked for, almost as if the lad didn't see the point in making a fuss, like what was the point anymore, this *farang* seemingly indestructible.

Even so, the Yank should be front and centre tonight, toughing it all out, but where the hell was he? Dan scoured every dark corner for the American, unlike him to skulk in the shadows, knowing he had to find him, sensing he was like a cornered rat, a filthy, slimy rodent and he headed deep into the club, preparing to confront him in his office. A weird kind of heat was pulsating off him, realising he had to keep it stoked, telling himself that Von Eil had orchestrated the whole thing. Without the Unquiet American, who'd suddenly gone as quiet as a mouse, to labour the bloody rodent analogy, none of this would've happened, he'd brought the darkness, the evil and he needed to pay.

"Sorry, so sorry," he said, having tipped part of his drink over another partygoer such was his haste, preparing to barge past after the mumbled apology.

"Someone's in a hurry," said the man.

"No way," he said, looking at the bejewelled hand clenching his arm, up at the face, Monroe staring back.

"Love, you look like you've seen a ghost. You're ever so pale. Still knocking around though."

"You don't wanna know, plus I haven't got the time. I need

one more favour from you, where's Von Eil?"

"Still got scores to settle, have we? I've seen the Daily. You got what you bugging wanted. They haven't got to me yet, the little soddin' grass that I am, but I'm done running. Probably haven't put two and two together as the Yank's not as smart as he thinks. I've been running all me life, and where's it got me?"

"Please."

"What's it worth?" he said, twiddling with the rings on his fingers, like he had all the time in the world.

"Why you covering for that scumbag?"

"I'm not. Just making you sing for your supper, but I've become an old pushover. Go outside, hail a cab, I'll text you the address. Hurry, because I reckon our American friend's gonna do a moonlit flit. Thought he was buying Tower Bridge and ended up with nada. You do the math, as his nibs might say. Amazing Thailand."

"Nige, thanks," he said, planting a kiss on the old man's cheek.

He ran out into the car park, hailing a cab, breathlessly reading out to the driver the address Monroe had texted him. The cabbie shook his head, either not wanting to go or having no idea where it was. Sensing the former, the fact Von Eil always spelled trouble, he shoved a hand in his pocket, brought out the remaining wad of notes and waved them under his nose, Mahogany Joe coming in handy for something, his dosh at least. The man merely nodded, the sight of money here, where there wasn't any, enough to make most people lose their senses, and Dan continued tonight's winning streak as they lurched off. He'd bet all his chips, but he knew the house usually won.

It didn't take long for them to exit the town, light and sound fading, darkness deepening, silence growing, Dan alone with his thoughts in the back seat, breaths coming faster and faster, hoping he was ready. The car rattled along, the road becoming rutted, just a track, dust billowing up in front

of them, jungle closing in either side. He thought back to the surety of London, the predictable life with Som and Max, but seeing his pained expression in the cab window, he'd never felt so lost, so far from home. This had to be the last piece of the puzzle in finding his way back there, he told himself, clenching his fists, forcing a smile, cabbie eyeing him ghoulishly in the rearview mirror. Was this another set-up? He imagined the man pulling to the side of the road, slitting his throat and slinging him into the undergrowth to be feasted on by wild animals. He was just a *farang*, a tourist, who would ever know, let alone bloody care?

They finally pulled up outside some massive wrought-iron gates, inexplicably spotlighted, the elaborate design looking garish, completely alien among the island's flora and fauna, a bum note but then he'd seen what development brought to the place, nature shunted aside in the rabid pursuit of profit, yet it was still marketed as some tropical idyll. The cabbie merely pointed him at the gates without even uttering a word, as if he didn't want to implicate himself, and Dan stepped out. First thing to hit the thud of music, non-stop party even here as he watched the driver do a screeching U-turn, red taillights fast disappearing down the road, alone but not alone as he pressed the intercom, waited.

"It is I," said a voice through the crackle, party noises clearly discernible in the background – the thumping music, the roar of the crowd.

Dan was briefly speechless, a chill running down his back on hearing Von Eil, just three words enough to know, even if the Yank did sound pissed.

"Todd, love, it's Nigel, Nigel Monroe," he said, wincing at the old hack's trick, trying to impersonate the most plausible person you know.

"What up, Nige. You best come on up to the manor. Plenty to talk about."

The gates opened with a buzz, as easy as that, though he did wonder whether there'd been cameras and this was

another trap. His impression of Monroe far from convincing but then Von Eil was wasted, hardly in a position to discern the nuances of someone's English accent.

"You Limeys all sound the same," he said aloud to himself, giggling as walked up the gravelled driveway, bordered by a manicured lawn, like the whole place had been transported from some affluent, Waspy American 'burb.

Yep, the villa, for he was sure that's what the Yank called it, identical to some sprawling Montecito mansion that even in its own habitat would've looked absurd but here on an island in the middle of the Gulf of Thailand it felt obscene, the place throbbing with the almost industrial drone of the music, magnesium glare of strobe lights so bright they pierced the shuttered windows. But looking at the decadent sight, the fact Von Eil had clearly decided the show must go on despite the implication of Dan's story in the Daily, caused his body to thrum, muscles tensing as he got closer and closer to the house, glad of the feeling, leaning right into it as he continually balled his hands into fists.

The front door was a gleaming but impenetrable black, though on closer inspection he realised it was ajar. Heartbeat coming in jags, he gave it a gentle push, slunk inside, music booming in his ears in the blackness, shivering at the smell, recognising it from the club at Coco Bananas, sweat, drugs, sex and his own animalistic stench. He shakily clicked on his cigarette lighter, the small flame dancing up the walls, black walls, the beat in his ears of no discernible tune hinting at something brooding, violent, tongue stuck to the roof of his parched mouth, tasting blood as he falteringly put one foot in front of the other, took a deep breath.

"Fuck," he said, lighter flickering then dying, but he groped his way to the end of the hallway, tripping on something underfoot, picking it up, eyes finally having adjusted, seeing it was a battered trainer, realising he was standing on pairs and pairs of them, lined up neatly beside a set of double doors and he shook his head.

Flinging them open, he was dazzled by the dizzying flash of the lights, setting him swaying, suffocatingly thick chemical hit of amyl nitrate in his nostrils. Creeping through his addled head the sight slowly came into awful focus, the certainty of all his fears, having to lean up against a wall, watching as old *farang* in various states of undress were entangled around young Thai men, whose clear, open-mouthed shrieks seemed deadened by the never-ending hum.

“I knew you’d come for me.”

“Mr Todd Von Eil!” he shouted over the music, wired into blue eyes, deep vacuous pools in no way connected to his smile.

“If that’s what you’re looking for, Limey. Listen, we can’t speak here. Let’s go through to another room. Follow me,” he said, taking him firmly by the arm, waving away what looked like concern from some of the other partygoers.

“You don’t seem surprised, worried that I’ve turned up unannounced, uninvited,” he said as they entered an atmospherically lit lounge, all 1960s style furnishings, white leather sofas, angle poise lamps, walls dripping modern art, curtains gently billowing next to open French windows that led out to an elegantly spotlit pool.

“Cunning stunt pretending to be Nige. What a cunning stunt. Man, you’re like a bad penny. Constantly in my face. Mind Madonna.”

“Madonna?” he said, kicking out at the snowy white poodle, sending it skittering back across the room as he slumped into a white leather easy chair, Von Eil doing the same opposite, in touching distance.

“As you can see, I love my pets. But take it easy, loser. I don’t want you rucking up my Oriental rugs. Let’s see if we can settle this like freakin’ adults.”

“But what the hell’s all this?” he said, stamping a foot down on the floor, sending the paintings juddering in their gilt frames, straining forward in his chair as he stabbed a finger towards the room they’d just come from.

“Fuck convention, that’s my motto. It’s so overrated.”

“You’re sick, do you know that?”

“Wait, man, I got another motto, another little homily for you, Brit. If it fucks, flies or floats, then rent it. And believe me, this is the place for rent,” he said, laughing so hard he shook, face a grotesque, flaming maroon in contrast to his thatch of white blond hair.

Dan swigged hard at his drink, looking on as the laughter died as quickly as it came, the Yank looking questioningly around himself, as if unsure for once, banter all bravado and as he got out a crumpled cigar from his pocket, it was Von Eil’s whole stature that seemed crumpled, diminished. Sinking further back in his chair, the tension in Dan’s body finally eased as the dog yapped madly at the American’s feet, like she could also sense her master’s disquiet.

“You could blabber the night away but all I know is what I saw in the room next door,” he said, standing up, perusing the art on the wall, coming face to face with a devilish wooden mask, running his slimy fingers around it. “What happened that night with Lerm, with Bill, with Corrine?”

“You see all this? Well do you, Limey? Look the fuck around you. Means nothing, nada, zip. I’m Johnny Foreigner just like you. First hint of trouble, my business partner Mr Gip closes ranks with General Chin. If you listen to them, Thailand’s open again for business, they don’t care how many bodies it takes to get the job done. Collateral freaking damage, you and me.”

“I’m not ready for any more of your riddles. What happened that night?”

“Okay, I said we’re both the same, but that ain’t really true. And you know it, peasant. I’m still up here, and you’re down there. I don’t need to tell you anything.”

He flung himself at Von Eil, slamming him into the back of the sofa, air bursting from the Yank’s lungs with a whoosh, eyes popping out of his head, finally animated, glint of silver as Dan put a knife to his throat, forlorn yapping of the dog the

only sound. "I'm not playing games anymore, your games."

"I don't know anything!" he shrieked.

"Talk, now. Or you're going for a swim with the fishes," Dan said hoarsely, applying more pressure, looking out at the pristine, ordered room, though the place felt infected by madness, crazy barking of the dog in his ears, continual pulse of the music from the sick party.

"I don't know anything."

"I'm not stupid. I know you were behind it all," he said calmly, but features screwed up with the effort of keeping the knife to his throat, American's face going the colour of the oh so artful sheepskin rug. "I'm not a journalist anymore, you know. I don't need to play by the bloody rules, the laws of any land. You don't give a fuck about any laws, why should I, eh?"

"Okay, okay..."

"Okay, what?" he said, scraping at his neck with the knife.

"I'll tell you what... what... you want... to know," he said, spluttering, Dan finally letting go.

"Why'd you do it?"

"Do what, dude?" said the Yank, having already caught his breath, enigmatic smile plastered back on his face.

"You know what."

"Let's return to the matter in hand. I give you what you want, then you frig off out of my ivory tower. Deal?"

"Let's see what you've got."

"Watch my lips. I had nothing to do with the killings of those Brit losers. You might wanna ask your boyfriend, Charlerm."

Each spiteful word lodged into his very soul, no longer able to look at Von Eil, not trusting himself but then his eyes alighted on a large picture hanging on the wall, Lerm, sporting that unforgettable smile, draped lovingly all over the Yank, dripping off him. Momentarily his mind went blank, like he couldn't think, almost as if the world had stopped spinning, then the dizzying fairground ride went into

overdrive, the music, the dog, words spilling from the American's mouth, but he didn't want to hear it.

"You think you're so bloody smart," Dan said, grabbing the dog, it wriggling insanely in his arms but managing to locate the knife with a free hand, pig-like squealing as he scored through the neck, bloody innards spilling onto the shagpile carpet, red stain growing tsunami style, sweat pouring from him as with a splitting of sinew like a snapping of elastic bands he ripped the head clean off, slinging it at Von Eil.

"Maddy, my Maddy," he said, on his knees, tears streaming down his face, stroking the dismembered head, the dog's glassy eyes staring up at them both.

"I know the truth now. Just remember I might be down there, as you put it but I'm better than you. I have some morals. You'll always need to be looking over your shoulder," he said, stood above the Yank, laying down Madonna's twitching, leaky abdomen on soft white leather.

He arrived at the airport terminal, watched the backpackers coming the opposite way, their massive bags as though full of dreams, looking down at his own battered, tiny holdall, chances spent but he smiled. Dan lit a Falling Rain as he loitered by the entrance to Departures, addicted to the cheap fags, needing a final hit of something to sustain him, having finally gone on the wagon but hoping the nicotine hit might be enough to stop the trembles, take the edge off as he prepared to be reunited with them.

Walking in, he saw the pair straight away, Som exactly where she'd promised, dependable as ever, Max next to her, both sporting those smiles he knew so well, smiles he knew he'd done the best to wipe away but sensing in her eyes that it was okay, they were okay, all three of them. He tried to open his mouth but was immediately enveloped in a group

hug, nothing really left to say as he breathed them in, the all too familiar smell that he'd inexplicably tried to forget, the soon to be ex-wife but Max would always be his.

Finally disengaging, Som pointed up at the TV on the wall. It was the fishermen, they were being smothered by their mums outside that satanic looking prison, unbridled joy in a bundle, and he felt his knees buckle, vision blinded by tears, but they held him up.

"Dad, you did that! You did that. My Dad did that!" shouted Max, addressing the whole terminal building, jumping up and down.

"Som, I know in my heart it won't work. Us. But please remember I really, really love you, both of you. I just have to stop running, go back to England, face justice," he said, the two people he cared most about in the world totally in his thrall, looking right back at him like nothing else mattered.

Acknowledgements

The characters in this book may be a fictional rogues' gallery but I've had the privilege – both fortunate and otherwise – of encountering their doppelgangers during my travels. Cheers to all of you! A special thank you to my husband, Gil, who has put up with me locking myself away for many hours while I write. I couldn't have done it without your love and support.

About the Author

When the Darkness Swallowed the Sun is Hove-based author and journalist Robin Newbold's latest thriller. It is based loosely on his years living in the Far East, most notably as a foreign correspondent in Thailand for The South China Morning Post and as an editor at Singapore tabloid the New Paper. His travel writing has appeared in the likes of Time Out, The Times and Bangkok Metro magazine. This is his fourth novel. Bangkok Burning was published in 2021, which followed Vacuum-Packed and Bloody Summer. He is a Crystal Palace fan.



Excellent LGBTQ+ fiction by unique, wonderful authors.



Thrillers
Mystery
Romance
Literary
Horror
Sci-Fi
Young Adult
& More

Visit us at
www.spectrum-books.com

Or find us on Instagram
www.instagram.com/spectrumbookpublisher