

PATTAYA BEACH

Pattaya Beach

A novel

by

John Elray

Aardwolfe Books

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Chapter 1

Nighttime at the Udon Thani bus terminal had a certain melancholy about it, as if everything should have been in black and white. The bustle of the daylight hours had long since faded and now every little sound that would have been partially absorbed by warm bodies earlier in the day echoed throughout the station, adding to the aura of loneliness for the final few passengers bound for Bangkok or points beyond.

A solitary bus engine droned at the distant end of the platform as the driver of Fah's bus started his, sending a black cloud over her and her family. Fah crammed her suitcase into the last remaining space in the undercarriage luggage compartment then picked up her teary-eyed daughter who had been closely tracking Fah's every move. Fah's mother, Wipawi, carried a small package.

"Try and get some sleep on the way," Wipawi said.

"Maybe better if I just sleep when I get to Pattaya, that way I'll be able to stay awake at work."

Wan grabbed a handful of Fah's hair and tugged.

"When are you coming back?" she asked.

"I'll get two days off every month, so if I save them up I can come back for a visit soon."

"I'm coming with you," Wan said with an unshakeable resolve.

"You can't, not this time, tilak. You be good and do what your Grandmama tells you while I'm gone. Okay?"

Wan pouted as Fah set her down beside Wipawi.

"It's your favorite," Wipawi said as she handed Fah the package, "... papaya salad, sticky rice, and mango."

Fah stared at the package as she spoke.

"Mama... I'm scared."

"I'm sorry, Fah, but it's the only way. Nhet will watch out for you, she's been there a long time now."

Fah hugged her mother and daughter and started up the bus's steps, stopping halfway and turning to Wipawi.

"Don't spoil Wan. I'll send you money every week, if I can."

"Fah, be careful. Remember; when you go with a man always make sure he uses a new condom."

Chapter 2

It was one o'clock in the afternoon and Billy Beer Bar would not start serving for another hour. With a knapsack slung over her shoulder, Fah strode into the open air establishment, passed the quadrangular bar and in a single motion slipped the pack off her shoulder, flung it into a waiting cubby hole, turned, and headed back toward the bar, stopping momentarily at the mirror mounted on the wall to fix her hair. Billy Bar was one of six just like it that shared a common roof across Beach Road from the turbid waters where speedboats were moored off Pattaya City, on Thailand's Gulf coast. Fah stood on her tiptoes to get a better view in the mirror – she was smaller than any of the other girls and more attractive than most. From behind she was often mistaken for a young teenager and was frequently asked by eager customers if she was old enough to be working in a bar, just to make sure they didn't land themselves in jail. She brushed a long strand of hair behind her ear and cocked her head this way and that, checking her dark complexion for reflections that could be powdered away.

"Fah!" a voice called out from behind the bar. "You're early today. First time ever!"

"Not the first time," Fah replied, still looking in the mirror. She finished preening and sauntered over to the bar, climbing onto her usual corner stool near the street.

"Nhet, Green Spot orange, ka," she said.

Fah stood on the crossbars of her stool to reach over the counter for a napkin to wipe the innumerable glistening beads of sweat off the back of her hands. The noontime heat in April was beyond intense, even under the shade of the well-ventilated bar's roof.

Nhet deposited a bottle of orange soda in front of Fah and placed a straw in it, then opened one for herself and took a seat.

Fah gazed out into the traffic, watching the incessant one-way flow of cars and motorbikes along the Beach Road, their engine noise being temporarily overcome by a truck-mounted loudspeaker broadcasting next weekend's Muay Thai match between Pattaya's two top kickboxers. A clothes vendor, pulling a cart rickshaw style at the road's edge, stopped in front of the bar and removed a mannequin torso outfitted in a black brocade mini-dress and another one wearing a beige lace top. Fah's eyes locked onto the garments as the vendor entered Billy Bar to afford the ladies a better look. She loved the dress, and the top would look great with blue jeans. Fah stared at them as the seller's words reverberated in another world. She looked up at him, smiled, and shook her head. Nhet did likewise, less the smile, and sent the peddler on his way.

"Nhet, I need to talk to the boss before we open today and he gets too busy."

Nhet tipped her head in the direction of the rear storage area and reinforced the motion by pointing with her thumb in hitchhiker fashion.

"Bill's in the back, counting cases of beer. What's up?"

Fah winced and glanced to her left and right.

"I need to borrow some money," she whispered.

Nhet straightened her posture.

"Again?"

Fah placed an upright index finger to her lips.

"Shhh! I have to pay one of the motorbike taxi drivers for money I borrowed last month. It's one week late now. He asks me about it every day. He's starting to get angry."

"How much?" Nhet asked.

"I need six thousand baht – five for what he gave me, four-hundred for the percent, and maybe five-hundred for me to send home." Fah caught the scent of beef strips cooking from a roadside grill. It made her mouth water. "And a little bit for food."

"I don't know whether Bill will do it this time. You've only been working here a few months and he lent you money just a week after your last payday."

"Yes, but I paid him back very quickly. I have to ask. He's my last hope, unless you..."

Nhet raised her hand to stop Fah in mid-sentence.

"Cannot – not right now. What about your boyfriend from Sweden?"

Fah's eyes skirted the floor as she spoke in a solemn voice. "No have. He doesn't call anymore."

Nhet nodded knowingly.

"Then I guess you'll have to ask Bill. Here he comes now. Talk to him alone, not in front of me. Choe dee ka – good luck."

Chapter 3

BOSTON, Massachusetts – April 4th, 6:50 p.m.

Ed hit the set button to stop his car radio from scanning the channels as he negotiated a broad curve in the Massachusetts Turnpike. An interview was in progress.

"I know that voice. Say his name goddammit." He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel to relieve the mounting stress of what seemed like an interminable wait. "Rappaport – it is him! That son of a bitch."

Ed cast a threatening glance at the radio but quickly broke it off to concentrate on the road. He switched his headlights to high beam as the car emerged from a fog bank, exposing a clearing western sky just past sunset, the red afterglow flooding his vehicle's interior.

The interview continued with the reporter asking a pointed question.

"But the girls who work for you... some of whom don't actually look old enough to be called women yet... they're essentially prostitutes, yes?"

The interviewee replied without hesitation.

"They're only prostitutes when they're accepting money for sex; the rest of the time they're human beings. These girls have no other options. If they weren't working in a bar they'd starve, and their families would starve. There's nothing else they can do to earn a living, not that they aren't capable, there's

just little other work to be had and what work is available goes to the ones who have at least finished high school."

"That may be so, but it's you that's capitalizing on the situation."

Ed adjusted the treble control to counteract the bass in Bill Rappaport's deep voice.

"If not me, then somebody else will. Look, since I've been in Thailand – and I've been here for over two years now – I've come to know and love the people and this country. I go out of the way to help my girls – who are, in fact, all over eighteen – and, I might add, that Billy Bar does far more for them than do many of the other bars which shamelessly exploit their help. I'll be here for the long haul to follow through on my commitment. I've made Pattaya my home and, if I have my way, I hope to live out my life and die here."

Ed's index finger attacked the radio's power button and all was silent, save for the hum of his tires on the pavement as he cruised along the highway at a comfortable eighty-five miles per hour. With one hand on the steering wheel, Ed groped for a pen and scribbled the name of Bill Rappaport's bar and the city on the back of his driving hand.

"So you want to die in Thailand, eh Chickenhead? Well that can be arranged."

Chapter 4

Bill sat on a stack of three beer cases, facing Fah, in the storeroom at the rear of Billy Bar. She sat on a stack of four to meet him at eye level.

"Why do I get the feeling this is about money, Fah?" Bill said with a half wink.

Fah laughed.

"How do you know I want to talk money, khun Bill?"

"Call it intuition."

"Into what...?" Fah replied, puzzled.

"I can read your mind."

"Oh... so do I need to talk more, or can you give me an answer now?"

Bill smiled. The slim, bearded American brushed a lock of his long, dirty-blond hair behind his ear, better revealing the aquiline nose that gave him the nickname 'Chickenhead'.

"Why don't you tell me what's on your mind?"

Fah looked into Bill's blue-gray eyes. Not an unattractive man she thought, actually not bad at all. Nhet was lucky. She got a lot of Bill's time. She had no problem getting money from him when she needed something.

Fah explained her situation. Bill listened and nodded periodically until she had finished.

"So, you think you can help me, just this once?" she said.

Bill hesitated for a moment.

"I can help you this one last time, Fah, but you can't tell any of the other girls, otherwise everyone will be looking for me to lend them money and I don't want to make a habit of doing that. You understand?"

"Yes, I understand," Fah replied.

"You do well for me Fah, you bring in a lot of customers, and I know you're new at this. It takes time to make and save money. So what I'm going to do is give you two thousand baht as an advance on your pay and lend you four-thousand to return to me when you can... don't borrow money from someone else to pay this back, take your time. But you mustn't tell anyone else about this, especially Miao. And I don't want to see you spending it on water guns for Songkran. Okay?"

She nodded.

Bill reached into his pants pocket to remove a wad of bills and peeled off six one-thousand baht notes which he handed to Fah.

Fah's eyes began to water. She looked down at the money clutched in her hands and at the out-of-focus floor beyond.

"Korp khun ka, khun Bill," she said, softly.

"Okay. Now go get the cart from Sky Bar and bring it back here so we can take everything we need out front in one load."

Fah slid her butt off the beer cases, wiped her eyes, and patted Bill on the back.

"Right away, boss."

Chapter 5

It was dark and drizzling when the plane touched down at Suwannaphum International Airport in Bangkok. Runway lights glistened off the tarmac, forming brightly colored streamers which swung like slow pendulums as the plane advanced towards the gate. The high pitched squeal of jet engines silenced most of the passengers, with the exception of a handful of avid talkers. Ed watched, counting the number of airliners that he had never seen on the ground in Boston. Myanmar, Royal Khmer, Thai, Royal Jordanian, and Malaysia Airlines jets, among others, dotted the runways and holding areas. It seemed as though his flight had taxied past them forever before it finally reached its assigned gate – a high, metal, canopied staircase at the bottom of which shuttle buses were queuing up to take him and his fellow travelers to the terminal. As the plane pulled alongside the staircase, the pilot cut power to the engines causing their noise to quickly drop in frequency until all was silent. Then came the sound of an avalanche of carry-on baggage being extracted from the overhead compartments.

While Ed waited to deplane, he gawked out the open door.

"Which terminal are we going to?" he asked the stewardess.

"There is only one passenger terminal at Suwannaphum, sir, but it's brand new and much bigger than the one at the old airport," she replied, pointing out the door to her right. "That building, over there."

Ed nodded his thanks and proceeded cautiously down the stairs into the open air, which was as much like a sauna as he had ever experienced. Sweat was already forming under his clothes as he reached the bottom of the staircase and dashed onto the waiting bus through a petroleum-scented fog.

"Mother o' Christ," he said in a low voice, wondering what it must be like during the day.

All the seats on the heavily air-conditioned bus had already been taken. Ed positioned himself next to a pole that ran from floor to ceiling and latched on to it. In contrast to the outside temperature, the pole was freezing. He looked out the window. The drizzle had produced large halos around the blue, roof-mounted spotlights of the terminal and, as the wind gusted, he could see the orientation of the rain in the halos shift from almost vertical to a forty-five degree angle. The sound of other buses passing by rose and fell as they scurried about the tarmac leaving trails of mist in their wake.

A voice with a British accent broke Ed's concentration.

"Bit sticky here, isn't it?"

Ed's head pivoted slowly till his eyes caught sight of the source – a rather short, plump man with a ruddy complexion who looked to be in his fifties.

"Oppressive is more like it."

"No," the man replied. "Tomorrow at noon – that will be oppressive, especially in Bangkok. It's hot here... with a capital *hot*."

Ed changed his grip on the pole to relieve a cramp in his hand. "Fortunately, I won't be staying in Bangkok very long."

The bus jerked to a rolling start, throwing both men off balance. Ed grabbed a hand strap to steady himself. The

Englishman grabbed hold of Ed, apologizing and introducing himself as he straightened Ed's jacket, which he had pulled askew. He offered his hand.

"The name's Dave. What's yours?"

Ed shook Dave's hand briefly and without sincerity, its fat fingers radiating the heat that the redness of his face implied.

"Lyle," he replied as he bent down to look out the window. The rain had intensified, forming a nearly opaque sheet through which Ed could barely see the lights of his plane receding into the distance on the left, as the terminal building grew larger on his right.

"So, where you headed, Lyle? Pattaya?"

Ed's head instantly swung back to see a startled look on Dave's face.

"What makes you think I'm going to Pattaya?" he asked.

"Well, I just assumed, since you're traveling light, that you might be blowing in here for a weekend junket. And there's no better place for that than Pattaya. I know. I live there. Good times." He winked.

"I'm here on business, serious business."

Dave moved ever so slightly back from Ed. "Sorry, chap – didn't mean to intrude. I was only trying to be sociable."

Ed was silent for a moment. He mustn't arouse suspicion.

"Forget it," he said. "I've had almost no sleep in the last two days. Big meeting coming up, at the Embassy, State Department business. Maybe if things finish up early I'll make a trip to Pattaya for some R and R."

The bus's engine groaned as the driver down-shifted and eased the vehicle to an erratic stop at the terminal.

"Consider it forgotten," Dave replied, picking up his bag. "Perhaps we'll see you there. You can make it up to me by buying a round. Cheers."

It took only half an hour from the time Ed stepped off the bus until he had cleared customs and was being assailed by countless taxi services vying for the fare to his downtown hotel. Low bid was seven-hundred baht, about eighteen dollars – higher than he expected but at that time of night he was in no mood to haggle. They drove west for twenty minutes on the Chonburi Motorway to the second stage of the elevated Bang Pa In Expressway and exited shortly thereafter, at Silom Road, where his hotel stood only two blocks from the Chao Phraya River as it meandered through Bangkok before emptying into the Gulf of Thailand. The rain had stopped but the short ride on the deserted street paralleling the elevated highway was unsettling to Ed. It was dimly lit and had a decidedly depressing quality about it, despite the tall, modern glass buildings that were interspersed among the older concrete structures. As the taxi passed the cross streets, Ed could see Bangkok's tallest skyscraper in the distance, amply lit with white and green lights to display its grandeur, looming above the buildings in the foreground. He rolled down his window to sample the air outside but closed it quickly as the scent of open sewer invaded the cab. As the driver pulled into the semi-circular driveway of the hotel, Ed glanced at his watch. It was almost one.

Ed paid the fare, grabbed his suitcase, and stood outside the oversized glass doors, bag in hand, staring into the lobby while the doorman performed his duty. He entered what had previously been the Crowne-Plaza hotel to a succession of wai's, mid-range bows of the head with the palms of the hands pressed firmly together and fingers pointing up. "Sawadee-kap," "Sawadee-ka," came the greetings from the male and female staff respectively. An attractive young lady in traditional Thai dress approached Ed. He eyed her microscopically as if he were committing each detail to memory – the dark silken hair tied back into a pony tail; rich blue sarong embroidered in red and gold along the bottom; long sleeved yellow top; and wide silk

sash, that matched the embroidery of the sarong, slung diagonally over her shoulder and fastened at the opposite hip.

"Sawadee-ka," she said as she wai'd him for the second time. "Checking in, sir?"

Ed nodded, a little dumbfounded, in part from the jet lag but mostly from being awestruck with the elegance of his greeter. Ed was captivated. He just stood there, mouth half open, staring into her eyes. She maintained the eye contact, smiling and giving Ed a slight bob of her head while she directed him forward with her outstretched arm.

The young lady attendant guided Ed to the registration desk where he performed the customary hotel ritual of presenting his passport and credit card in exchange for a room key. She waited a respectful distance away as Ed completed the transaction and then led him to the elevators where she wai'd Ed once more. He stopped the door as it was about to close.

"By the way, Miss..."

"Phanpit," she replied.

"...Miss Phanpit. Do you know of any place close to the hotel where I might buy souvenirs, like Thai ceremonial swords and daggers?"

"Certainly, sir. There's an antique shop just up the street on Silom Road. They sell reproductions too. The concierge can give you directions."

Ed reasoned that he might as well have a keepsake from this trip that was functional too. He pictured, in his mind's eye, the expression on Chickenhead's face. Ed's head began to nod slowly and unconsciously.

"Sir?" Phanpit's voice, accompanied by the grating buzz of the elevator's open door alarm, echoed off the walls and floor of the marble hall that housed the lifts.

"Huh?"

"Anything else, sir?"

"No, that'll be all Miss Phanpit, thank you," Ed replied.
"Thank you very much."

Ed released the door-open button and watched attentively while Phanpit walked back to her post in the well appointed lobby with unsurpassed grace. As the elevator doors closed, Ed's first taste of Thailand was progressively reduced to a narrower and narrower vertical slice until it disappeared from view altogether.

Chapter 6

The morning taxi ride from Bangkok southeast to Pattaya lasted almost three hours. It took Ed through skyscraper-enclosed city streets; over elevated expressways bounded by suburban financial and technology businesses; along secondary roads lined with long, dingy, low lying, sign covered buildings that sported balconies with pillared railings on their second and third floors; past roadside stands selling automobile tires, fenders, pre-fabricated plastic shrines; and past several small farms whose houses were topped with rusting, corrugated metal roofs. Occasionally, Ed would see an elephant, complete with rider, lumbering alongside the road, drivers taking care to maintain their distance. In a contest between an elephant and a speeding automobile there are no winners, only losers.

Ed noted the stark contrast between the dilapidated farm houses and the innumerable temples that were maintained by the country's orange-robed, shaven-headed Buddhist monks. It seemed that every couple of kilometers another immaculate white-walled wat appeared with its three-tiered roof, each successively smaller tier resting like a saddle on the one underneath. A sea of red tiles bordered with green trim adorned the roofs which were protected from evil by golden wing-like chofa that protruded from the peaks and corners of each tier. Sometimes it was a sea of blue tiles bordered in red with a thin yellow line between the blue and red. Within the compound of

each wat, Ed could see a large gold structure, the size of a bus turned on its end, that had a shape reminiscent of a nineteenth-century Prussian helmet.

He pointed past the driver's face, in the direction of the object. "What's that?" Ed asked.

The driver tried to follow Ed's slowly moving finger as he skirted his way around the plague of motorbikes that hugged the left-hand side of the road. He replied in fairly good, but definitely fractured, English.

"Called chedi. Every wat has a chedi. Long time ago, when the king or important monk died, monks put ashes from the body inside for keep safe. Before that, holy things from Buddha stay there. You want to go see? Easy you go see, no problem. You go to the wat and look around, maybe you give a little money to help the monks, they would be very grateful. If you don't want to give, no problem."

"Not today," Ed replied. "Plenty of time later. Maybe I'll go see the big wat in Bangkok on my way back." But Ed had no expectation of going back.

"Oh yes, Wat Phra Kao, very beautiful. You must see."

The driver looked quickly over his shoulder to check for traffic before cutting across two lanes and into a gas station that sat beside a construction site. He got out of the taxi requesting five minutes to replenish his fuel supply of liquid propane. Ed maneuvered his six-foot frame out of the vehicle, using the opportunity to stretch his legs which were starting to get cramped after riding for over two hours. He walked slowly toward the construction site, extending the muscles in his arms and legs with each movement, feeling the tension abate. Ed watched the workers as they appeared to be heading for an altercation with one of their own, or an intruder – it was hard to tell. The man appeared drunk and belligerent as several of the workers came to the aid of another. Pushing led to punches as three men tried to restrain the drunk before shoving him away,

only to have him march back towards them. A small boy ran up beside Ed and pointed at the commotion.

"Boxing, boxing", he said in English to Ed, as he simultaneously beamed his friends.

A fourth man picked up something that looked to Ed to be a long two-by-four, but it flexed, so it obviously wasn't. He swung it hard, coming across the drunkard's back and knocking him to the ground. The drunk had raised himself to his hands and knees when another man struck him twice on the back of the head with a large rock that he held in one hand.

"Okay, sir," the taxi driver said, "...ready to go now."

As he walked back to the car, Ed looked over his shoulder to see a uniformed security guard breaking up the fracas, and the injured man, on his knees once again, alternately feeling his head and looking at a bloodied hand.

Ed slumped back into the right rear seat of the taxi, behind the driver, where he felt it would be safest in case of an accident. With the way people drove in Thailand, Ed figured accidents must be commonplace. The driver pulled back onto the highway and stepped on the gas, narrowly missing a motorbike that zipped in front of him.

After a while, Ed opened a map that he had picked up at the airport in Bangkok but couldn't concentrate, so he stared out the window, focusing on a thumbprint on the glass, letting the blurred scene outside whiz by. He could remember to the day the last time he saw Bill Rappaport. Twelve years had passed since, but after all that time the echo of Chickenhead's parting words still reverberated in Ed's mind.

'Someday you'll thank me for this.'

"That's a laugh," Ed said aloud, his hand crumpling the right side of the map in a vice-like grip.

The driver looked in his rear view mirror. "You talk to me, sir?"

Ed didn't respond, he just continued staring out the side window reliving that day, recalling the humiliation, then the anger, and his promise.

'I'll get you if it's the last thing I ever do!'

He heard the phrase in an old black and white movie once and had always looked for a chance to use it. That day twelve years ago was tailor-made for the occasion. Ed clenched his jaw as his head nodded ever so slightly up and down. Payback time had come.

"I'll get you if it's the last thing I ever do."

Ed turned his head to face forward again and noticed the driver's fearful look in the rear view mirror, his eyes focused on Ed.

"Oh no... I'm sorry, not *you*." Ed laughed. "I was just thinking of a movie I saw last week. That was one of the lines in it."

The driver looked relieved.

"No problem," he replied, turning off the main road onto one marked as Pattaya Klang with presumably the same thing written on the sign in Thai script above the English.

Ed looked at the map but had a hard time reading it as the car bounced over the rough road of a construction area.

"Are we on the main street going into Pattaya?" he asked.

"This is Central Pattaya Road. It will take us to the Beach Road where your hotel is."

Ed couldn't see the end of Pattaya Klang, a wide yet crowded street bustling with activity. Red and yellow fronted gold jewelry shops, fruit markets, clothes stores, the occasional Seven-Eleven, and numerous brown-skinned faces milling about on the sidewalk in an orderly chaos kept Ed's eyes occupied. The near incessant sound of small bore engines and nasal horns from the sea of motorbikes that surrounded the cab assaulted his ears, their exhaust fumes easily seeping into the passenger

compartment of the aging taxi. Within ten minutes, however, they had arrived at their destination. Ed gazed out at the hotel's modest entrance and weathered sign. Not quite what the photo in the advertisement showed, but it would suffice for the short time he'd be in town. Ed got out, collected his bag, and paid the driver, who wai'd in gratitude and then jumped back in the cab and took off. He stood for a moment looking up at the sign – a washed out neon with all but one of the letters illuminated and a coconut palm flanking the words Pattaya Beachcomber. To his left, half a block away, he could see the tawny sand of the beach and an almost unbroken array of multi-colored beach umbrellas that blocked view of the shoreline like a palisade wall. A little further out, the waters of the Gulf of Thailand glistened as wave after wave poked their white crests above the tops of the umbrellas, then disappeared, revealing an entrancing aqua-blue in the distance. When Ed turned his head away, all went dark, briefly, until his pupils recovered enough for him to enter his temporary home and approach the reception desk.

By the time Fah arrived for work it was four o'clock. Billy Bar had been open since two and was short of help. This would not look good to khun Bill.

"Fah!" Nhet called out from behind the bar. "Boss says he go to Rayong today, he don't come here, maybe not tomorrow either. He said, if you have no man tonight, you do the cashier's job after I leave at ten. Okay?"

"Can do," Fah replied as she accelerated her backpack and mirror ritual and then climbed onto her favorite corner stool. She silently thanked Buddha for making Bill take this particular day off. "Many customers today, Nhet?"

"The street is getting a little busy now, but not many coming in. I can't wait for high season to start again but that's

still many months off. Too long." Nhet rested her chin in her hands with her elbows on the counter. "You need to turn on your charm, Fah. Bring in the big spenders."

Fah looked around at the other girls, some of which sat on the opposite side of the bar chatting, others standing by the sidewalk entreating prospective clients to come in for a drink, latching on to arms and hands amid their calls of 'Well come'.

"I don't know, Nhet. Today I feel not too good. I don't feel like talking. I don't feel like smiling. How can I work like that? What can I do?"

Nhet sat up straight, then slid off her stool to fetch a grape soda from the cooler. She opened it.

"Fah, how you going to take care of your family if you don't work? They have no money. It's all up to you. You have to find a smile somewhere inside. You have to talk to your customers. If you don't, they'll go to some other girl or, even worse, to some other bar. Then everybody loses – you, the boss, maybe the other girls, because the boss has less to pay them."

"I'll try. I guess if I didn't think I could try, I wouldn't have even come today. I would probably have wasted the time sleeping, or drinking with Noi in my room."

Nhet took a sip from the soda and handed the bottle to Fah, giving her a nod and a confident smile.

"That's my girl. Now get out there and bring them in."

Fah took the bottle, drank a little, and returned it to Nhet. She spotted a likely mark walking down the sidewalk, taking his time, gawking at the surroundings as if he was looking for someone. She made her move to intercept him, approaching on the diagonal to cut off the path of the other girls who could also see him coming.

"Well come," Fah called out to him, straining to make her voice heard above the others. She took the unwary victim by the hand and shook it. "How are you today? Where from?"

Before he could answer either question Fah had Ed in tow, leading him to a seat at the bar and hatching a plan on the fly to snare him.

Chapter 7

The smell of dried squid cooking on a roadside cart invaded Ed's nostrils. He waved his hand in front of his face in a futile attempt to disperse the smoky scent. Ed looked up at the sign hanging from the ceiling directly above the cash box. Billy Beer Bar. What good fortune, he thought, after looking all afternoon, to finally be escorted right into the place he was searching for. With all the clutter amongst the several bars at that spot, he wondered if he could have even picked it out on his own.

The young lady who had brought Ed in sat beside him. Petite and dark-skinned, with a small, almost bridgeless nose that flared slightly at the nostrils, she was a vision of cuteness. She pulled her long black hair from around her face and fastened it in the back with a large, imitation mother-of-pearl hair clip.

"What's your name?" she asked.

Before he could catch himself, Ed blurted out his real name. He gave himself a mental kick, followed by a silent 'Fuck!'.

"Ed," Fah repeated. "That's easy – easy for remember and easy for Thai lady to say."

"What's yours?" Ed asked.

"Name is Fah," she replied.

"That's an easy one for me too. So tell me, Fah, you the big boss here?"

Fah laughed. "No," she said in a slow, low tone. "Fah not the big boss here. Boss didn't come today. Maybe not tomorrow either. He go on a trip."

"A trip? Good for him. Everyone needs a trip once in a while." Ed watched as the girls started to bring in new customers, while other men came in on their own and greeted the women already seated at the bar as if these men were regulars. Ed reached down to his left shin and, feigning to scratch through his trousers, felt around it to make certain that the mock-antique dagger he bought in Bangkok was still securely in place. "So you think he'll be back in a couple of days?"

"Hard to say. Maybe yes, maybe no." Fah took Ed's hand in hers. "When you're boss, you can do like that."

"I take it from your sign that his name's Bill?"

"Yes," she replied, nodding, "... boss name is Bill. But when he's not here, my friend Nhet is boss. She come from the same part of Thailand as me."

Suddenly, a voice called from across the bar.

"Lyle!"

Ed looked over his shoulder, across the bar's quad, to see the ruddy-faced Englishman he'd met on the bus at the airport two nights before. He muttered an almost inaudible 'fuck'.

"I thought you said your name was Ed?" Fah asked, looking a little puzzled, although it wasn't uncommon for customers to use a made up name.

"It is, but play along with me here. I met this jerk on the bus at the airport."

"Lyle." Dave, missing a footstep on his approach, stumbled as he extended his free hand to shake. "Fancy meeting you here. Small world."

"Ya." Sometimes too small, Ed thought.

"How'd your meeting go?"

