

Thai Kiss

by

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CHAPTER ONE

The flight

When your best mate gets washed up on the beach with a hole in the back of his head, it's time to reflect. I turned it over and over in my mind but there was only one conclusion. If I stuck around, I'd be next. They said it was an accident, that he'd been drinking and hit his head as he went over the railings of Brighton Pier. Sure... and Hollywood is itching to film my life story.

Tommy hadn't touched a drop of alcohol for months and he hated that pier with a passion. There was something about the way you could look down between the wooden slats and see the water sloshing about underneath. He nearly drowned in a swimming pool when he was a lad, his brother held him under for a joke that went too far and he'd been terrified of water ever since. Tommy wouldn't go near the pier of his own accord.

He used to like to drink, but then the doctor told him to take a year off the booze or his liver wouldn't make it to his fortieth birthday. It was tonic water only from then on. I had to cover for him... pretend he was knocking back the gin and he had to make out he was getting drunk like the rest of us. It was bad enough drinking "cocktails" instead of beer, but if the lads knew he was teetotal they'd have given him hell. All feels a bit trivial now. Someone did make his life hell... the last bit of it anyway.

I booked the flight at the last minute and spent the whole taxi ride to the airport convinced that the car behind was following us. Then it would overtake and the driver would turn out to be some middle-aged bloke looking glum while his wife gave him an impromptu driving lesson from the passenger seat, or a tosser in a Subaru trying to impress his girlfriend. No sign of any heavies coming to offer me an unwanted change to my itinerary. The M25 is England's most infamous motorway; it's intended to speed drivers round the outskirts of London instead of forcing them through the city's gridlocked streets. Most days it's a parking lot for a couple of million angry motorists. I chose such a day to make my escape. Occasionally the traffic flowed, but most of the time we just edged bumper to bumper towards the airport. There was plenty of time to stare at the electronic signs warning stationary drivers not to exceed fifty mph because of congestion. The guy in the control centre must have been chuckling as he put that one up. I spent the journey nervously checking out neighbouring vehicles and thumbing my nearly new passport. It was six months old and had been used only twice - once when I took Clare to Marbella and once when I went to Thailand with Tommy. The man in the photograph looked like a complete stranger, but it wasn't... it was me, Paul Murphy, hospital porter and part-time drug dealer.

No one ever called me handsome. "He's nice looking," they'd say. Nice? Could be worse.

The guy in the picture wasn't smiling, Passport Office rules, but he looked happy enough. Dark, curly hair that was maybe a bit too long. Clear brown eyes, Clare always said they were mischievous. A strong chin... or two. Too much beer and home cooked food were starting

to take their toll, but at six feet three inches I reckoned I could carry it off. Oddly enough I kept catching a glimpse of another guy in the driver's rear view mirror, it couldn't be the same person. This one looked drawn and pale, the eyes were bloodshot and two days without a shave made him look dirty. Maybe that was a good thing, nobody would recognise me as the nice looking bloke in the passport photo, but then a lot had happened since that was taken.

I didn't really relax until I'd fastened my seatbelt on the plane. I scanned the cabin for any suspicious looking faces but it just made me laugh. I spotted several shifty looking characters on the flight, which should have spooked a man in my advanced state of paranoia, but I figured I'd nothing to fear. There were plenty of families, the parents already looked exhausted and the kids looked bored. An ideal start to an eleven hour flight. And there were dozens of student types, off to find themselves by backpacking through Asia and all set to immerse themselves in a foreign culture. I gave it about three days before they'd be gagging for a KFC or asking the locals if there was a Nando's nearby. They were off to get drunk and get laid and give their CV a much needed boost in the process. The shifty characters were older and they weren't going East to find themselves; they were in search of someone else entirely. They were probably not sure exactly who the person was, only that they'd be young, beautiful, brown and willing to do whatever the man wanted in exchange for a few pounds.

I was pretty sure I'd made my escape. The plane left the stand and by the time they served breakfast the next morning, Thai Airways flight TG 911 would have about

90 minutes to go before landing in Bangkok. It gave me time to think about how a humble hospital porter could be on the run from Brighton's most feared gangster. Sure, it's only a little tinpot seaside resort and Terry Connor wasn't exactly the head of the Russian mafia but he arranged for my mate to be killed and I was certainly next in line.

If I told you I grew up less than half a mile from Brighton's fancy Marina you'd probably think I had it pretty easy. The issue for the town planners was that the roughest council estate in Brighton was there long before they identified the one place where the south coast's rich and famous could moor their gin palaces. They simply made sure there was a nice fast east to west road. The millionaires could make a quick getaway without even looking at the sprawling expanse of run-down housing on the hill immediately to the north.

I once played in a charity tournament at a local golf club and found myself sitting at a table with a bunch of policemen. They were all northerners who'd been posted to Sussex by the Force. I mentioned I was a local boy and couldn't resist admitting I grew up in Whitehawk. There was a physical reaction, they all lurched back in their seats and I swear they reached to check if their wallets were still there. It's what happens when you tell people you come from that estate. Tommy would have been furious; it's the sort of thing that draws attention. What would a Whitehawk boy be doing at a fancy golf club? Any decent copper would wonder whether he had a little sideline they should look into. Fortunately these guys were more interested in the free wine and once they got over the

initial shock, they ignored me and carried on bragging about all the villains they'd nicked over the years.

If I really craned my neck from my bedroom window on the estate, I could just about catch a glimpse of the odd mast. Even then I thought that someday I'd have one of those boats. I'd be piling along the coast road in a Porsche or a Ferrari, with some gorgeous little thing who couldn't wait to take her top off on the deck of my yacht. What happened to Tommy put it on hold for a while but I'd be back, that was for sure.

There are quite a few ways of surviving a Brighton council estate. You can be "hard", or at least give a convincing impression that the smallest slight will be met with extreme force. Having girls fall at your feet is another, considerably more appealing, option. Sport is a third alternative, but it has to be a man's sport. Bend it like Beckham and you're cool whatever you look like, but captain the school table tennis team and you're a nerd by definition. Or you can make them laugh... being the funny guy in the group will generally save you from being at the bottom of the food chain. If you can make the girls laugh, then you're into option two as well, and things are really looking up. I never really cracked any of the four but I was a big lad so nobody came looking for a fight. I played in goal for the school soccer team mainly because no-one else wanted to and was amusing enough company to score a few points with both sexes. It didn't take me long to work out that I didn't have to say much to the girls, I just had to look like I was listening. So I never rose to the top of the pack, definitely not Alpha male material. I did what was required so no-one wanted to kick my head in and

was big enough to sow a seed of doubt as to whether they could if they tried.

Did I mention I'm a Roman Catholic? Well that helped too. I got to go to school away from the estate because my mum was a proper churchgoer. It was called a Comprehensive. It sounds fancy but means they stick everyone together regardless of how smart they are and just hope for the best. So it barely counted as a proper education, but it meant I could occasionally put my hand up in class without risking a stone through my window at home. There was etiquette to follow of course. It was a ten-minute walk from the bus stop to my front door every evening. My school blazer and tie were stuffed into my sports bag well before I got near the estate. If I hadn't done that, the chances are I'd have made it home eventually but the uniform would have become a trophy for a local hard man.

I bought myself a golf club membership on my twenty-third birthday. On the fourteenth tee there was a sign that said; "the object of the game is to stay just behind the group in front, not just ahead of the group behind". The exact opposite was the recipe for success in my school. Try hard enough to keep the teachers off your back, but not so hard that the tough kids think you're a clever dick. I pulled it off perfectly. Leaving school at sixteen, I passed four GCSEs I couldn't admit to back on the estate, but I'd never got into a fight and the other kids liked me enough never to burgle our house. My mum worked at the local hospital so I was a shoe-in for a job as a porter. As jobs went, it was no great shakes but I met Tommy and after a while he showed me that there was a

way for young kids to make their way in the world. You didn't have to be born with a silver spoon in your mouth; you just had to be smart and patient.

Tommy, my brother the dealer

Tommy was like the big brother I never had. He'd worked at the hospital for a few years, really knew his way around and everybody loved him. There was a regular Friday night trip to the pub, but if Tommy wasn't going, people lost interest and drifted away when the shift ended. At lunchtime, everyone gravitated towards his table and I could bathe in the reflected glory, as they all knew I was his best mate. He went through girlfriends at an astonishing rate but it never put the ladies off. As he tired of one girl, the next would be standing in line certain they could rise to the challenge and be "The One". It never happened of course.

He was definitely a good-looking bloke with grey-blue eyes the colour of a mountain lake in springtime... or so the girls told me. Tommy had short blond hair and that unshaven look that takes so much longer to maintain than if you get the razor out every day. I could never be bothered with that sort of thing, but Tommy had a big female fan club and was eager not to let them down.

He and I hit it off straight away. Tommy was the master at appearing to work his tail off, whilst actually doing the bare minimum. I became a devoted apprentice. I guess I should have been pissed off when I realised what he was doing but he had a way about him, you just couldn't get angry. Like the time we literally bumped into each other as he came out of the dispensary at the back of the Accident & Emergency department. I'd delivered a

corpse to the mortuary minutes earlier and he'd stolen some class A drugs from a locked cupboard. I might not have realised anything was amiss, but our collision made him drop the box in his hand and there was no sign of the paperwork he'd have if he'd come by it legitimately.

"What the fuck?" he said. "Oh it's you."

"What you got there then, Tommy?"

"Leave it, I'll tell you over a coffee... OK?"

I'd already worked out what was going on before taking even three sips of the slurry that passed for coffee in the staff canteen. Tommy was stealing drugs and then getting me to deliver them to his contact in the hospital reception area in a box marked as samples. I genuinely thought the guy was from a laboratory and it was legitimate.

"You were never at risk mate. I wouldn't have done that to you. The top brass keep an eye on me because they know I have access to all parts of the hospital. They don't notice you. If you were caught I'd have taken the blame anyway."

Tommy had a way about him; he could look you straight in the eye and tell you a barefaced lie. Not only did you believe him, you'd be eternally grateful he was willing to talk to you at all. It was the sort of skill that gave the likes of Tony Blair a decade or so running the country; it just made Tommy a very successful drug dealer. Anyway, if I did have any doubts, he banished them with the magic words.

"I wasn't sure I could trust you, it was part of a test and you passed with flying colours mate. You can be a full partner now. Welcome to the Firm... if that's what you want."

At that moment I couldn't think of anything I wanted more in the whole world. I gave him one of those playful, blokey punches on the shoulder.

"Yeah, I'm in."

And that's how it all started.

Clare and the lobster that never was

Clare looked amazing in that nurse's uniform and she knew it. Not exactly beautiful but she had no shortage of admirers. I didn't really think I'd much of a chance but strange things happen when it's a staff party and someone else is picking up the bill. Clare had long natural blonde hair and every time I saw her she'd have it styled in a different way. It was like she was trying on new personalities but hadn't quite found one she liked. At work it was all tied up in a bun under her cap but, whenever I saw her socially, it would be a slightly different but equally sexy Clare. Sporty ponytails, fluffy curls and even schoolgirl plaits all put in an appearance. On the fateful night, Clare clearly spent a few hours with the straighteners and went for that look they use on shampoo commercials to show that split ends are for poor people. The scarlet dress was a little too tight but none of the men in the room could see a problem with that. Clare was a tad overweight but it was all in perfect proportion, she looked fabulous.

I thought I was all set for the evening. At the start I'd propped up the bar with Tommy, but he disappeared after taking a call on his mobile. I wandered round for a while and got chatting to a group of student nurses. They were happy to talk to anyone who knew more about the hospital than they did. It would be a while before they

realised porters were close to the bottom of the food chain. The girls started to drift away until I was left with Gemma. She was giving plenty of signals that my luck was in and I was happy to let her talk about... well I have no idea actually, I wasn't really listening. I was watching Clare work the room. It was a moment of impulse when I saw her standing alone. I told Gemma I was going to get more drinks and strolled over to where Clare was draining her glass. She was drunk.

It took another couple of vodka tonics to get her to admit some guy treated her badly, and she was "trying to forget". I made her laugh and then listened while she told me all her problems. At least I looked her in the eyes and nodded at all the right times. I was actually thinking how the Albion were going to line up against Crystal Palace on Saturday and what she might be wearing under that dress. To my complete amazement, I got the answer to the second question about an hour and a half later. As we left the party I got plenty of envious glances from the other men and a look of sheer malice from Gemma.

I was certain Clare would give me the boot the following day but it didn't happen. She told me how lucky she thought it was that our paths had crossed. It would have been nice if she said how I drove her wild with desire, that she didn't know the meaning of passion until she met me, that I was handsome or charming. Clare set her sights a bit lower I guess.

"I'm so lucky, you are so reliable."

"I know you'd never let me down."

"I love it that I can really trust you. Carol's boyfriend just went off with her best mate."

"I feel so comfortable with you, you don't make me feel like I have to be looking my best all the time."

You get the picture. But she seemed happy enough, so why complain? I moved into her flat and life was pretty good. The sex tailed off a bit after the first few months but it was still amazing when it happened and she was up front about it.

“Blow jobs and lobster thermidor,” she announced one evening.

“Sounds like the menu of a restaurant I’d like to visit,” was my witty retort.

“Do that and you are dead lover boy,” she said.

“OK, what about blow-jobs and lobster whatsitsname?” I asked.

“Just two of the things you’ll never get at home,” she smiled.

Her flat, her rules.

I wasn’t getting out so much since I moved in with Clare. She was happy for me to go to the football on a Saturday when Albion were playing at home and I played for a local team on Sunday, but she wasn’t remotely interested in coming to watch. I was banned from the flat once a week when she had her night in with the girls. Otherwise, it wasn’t a smart move to come home late, especially with beer on my breath. If I was doing a late shift at the hospital she’d phone the porter’s office to speak to me instead of calling my mobile. So many of her mates were messed about by blokes, I guess it was understandable. The last one she was seeing before we hooked up was a prize dick as well. He promised her the earth, then one day he packed his bags and fucked off to Marbella. Clare said he took her out on her birthday, spent the night at her flat, then the next morning she got a text as she was on her way to work.

“Off to Spain to make my fortune, will be back for you when I’m rich,” or words to that effect. She barely mentioned him since that night at the staff party so I reckon she was handling it pretty well.

Tommy was constantly trying to get me to join him on one of his boy’s tours. He said that was where he first got a taste for drugs but more importantly, where he got the idea that selling them was a great way of paying for his own supply. He’d come back from Ibiza, Falariki or Kos with more money than he had when he went away. Tommy always had the knack of finding a local dealer and the balls to then go and sell the stuff he didn’t want for himself. Occasionally he’d find a girl who’d unwittingly carry some surplus supply back into the UK. It was always a girl. One night with Tommy and they’d do virtually anything for him. Then he discovered Thailand.

His first trip was courtesy of a nurse he started dating at the hospital. Selena was from a wealthy family and Tommy was certain their relationship was her way of getting back at a domineering father. Apparently he hoped for great things from his daughter, he wanted her to be a surgeon like daddy. Selena probably had the brains but none of the drive. She wanted to do a worthwhile job and have a good time until she found a wealthy bloke to marry. In the meantime she intended to have some fun and take as many opportunities as she could to raise her father’s blood pressure. The poor man had barely got over his daughter’s choice of employment when she turned up at home with a messenger boy who pushed the sick, the dying and the dead round a hospital for a living. Selena’s mother never denied her anything and was happy to hand over her own credit card to pay for the holiday with

Tommy. Whether it was motherly love or her own attempt to provoke Selena's father was uncertain but they didn't care, it was a free holiday.

Unusually, I didn't get so much as a text message from Tommy while he was away but on his first day back he was full of it. He'd fallen in love with Thailand and found a way to take our little sideline and turn it into something very special indeed. The beaches were the best he'd ever seen, the food was incredible, the women were extraordinary and, if he could, he'd have moved there the next day. The most exciting part for him was that he met a guy named Clay who was going to be the key to making us our fortune. Then Tommy would retire and open a bar somewhere I never heard of before - a place called Pattaya.

Tommy met Clay in a bar near the beach.

"I knew he was a dealer the minute I set eyes on him," Tommy claimed.

I laughed. "So did he have one of those signs round his neck then? Ecstasy tablets, buy one get one free."

"No mate, don't be an arse. I can always tell by the body language. I watched him for a while, the way he used his phone, turning away whenever he got a call. Looking around to see who was watching him. Always looked a bit jumpy and nervous."

"So what did you do?"

"I just asked him for some stuff. I asked what the locals take and if he could get me some."

"Jesus mate, he could have been a copper," I said.

"Wrong colour matey. Anyway, I've seen blokes like that loads of times, I was sure he was dealing and he said he could get me as much as I liked. It isn't buy one get one free, this guy deals in thousands at a time."

“So did you get Selena to bring you some back then you evil bastard.”

A shadow passed over Tommy’s face for a second, then he laughed.

“No mate, it didn’t work out. She dumped me on the third day. I spent eleven days on my own. As far as I know she’s living with some Thai bloke who rents jet skis on the beach in Pattaya. I guess she finally found someone who pisses her Dad off even more than I could.”

I tried to look like I was feeling sorry for him, but I did get a little boost from the thought that not absolutely everything drops into his lap.

“I’m sorry mate, that must have been a real kick in the balls. So you spent all that time on your own then?”

That’s when Tommy’s trademark smile returned, he put his arm round me and told me about the women of Pattaya. I started to think I was wrong. Everything did drop into his lap and if a little trial was ever sent to irritate him it was God’s way of making what happened next even sweeter.

Four pints of lager gave Tommy time to set the scene in Pattaya.

“Fifty quid maximum mate, plus your drinks and a couple for her.” Tommy was explaining how much it might cost to take a girl home from a Pattaya bar.

“I can’t believe you’re paying for it. They drop at your feet over here.”

”It’s not like that, really. I thought it was a bit grim to start with too. First couple of nights with Selena we’d watch the blokes in the bars. Really old some of them. There are blokes in their forties and fifties going home with fucking teenagers. We thought it was disgusting.”

I wrinkled my nose to show I shared his distaste.

“Then Selena goes off with this Thai bloke and I end up in a bar on my own. I guess I’m looking pretty miserable and this cute little Thai girl comes up and starts to chat with me. We play a few daft bar games and have a couple of drinks then she asks if I want to take her home. She never mentions money at all. I only realised the next day that I must have paid this bar-fine thing. It was about ten quid so I wouldn’t have even noticed when it went on my bill. It’s what the bar charges to let the girl go for the night. So we went for something to eat, had a couple of drinks in a club on Walking Street and back to the hotel.”

I was still struggling to believe my mate paid for a hooker, but he seemed to think it was completely normal.

“She was awesome between the sheets. Fabulous body and up for anything. We were at it all night. Then in the morning she just said, ‘You can give me some money?’ It never felt like she was charging me for it, I was giving her a present.”

“No way,” I said, “that’s disgusting. You don’t need to pay for it and God knows how many people she’s had before. It’s got to be hundreds.”

“Could be thousands mate, but who cares. I was careful and she was great. I spent a couple of days with her and then we said goodbye. None of the crap you get over here where they want a ring on their finger after a couple of shags.”

I was far from convinced but Tommy was more enthusiastic about Thailand than anything he ever talked about before. He joined a forum called Pattaya-Dream and was chatting happily to men of all ages who were every bit as hooked as he was. My mate was a sex tourist. I couldn’t even admit to Clare that he went to Thailand or

she'd have gone crazy. She wouldn't want me spending time with a bloke who went to a place like that. I tested the water with her once, saying someone I knew was thinking of going there for a holiday.

"Well he must be a paedophile then, that's the only reason men go to Thailand. Or he's a drug dealer, I'm sure that's where all the heroin and stuff comes from," she said.

I couldn't really argue with her, I guess that wasn't far off my own perception of the place. Now Tommy was painting me a picture of a beautiful country with great beaches, fantastic food and women who were sweet, fun and sexy as hell. Sure they got you to pay for it but it's not like dating a western woman is a cost-free option. Well, that was Tommy's logic anyway.

Once he got through talking about the women, Tommy started to explain how we wouldn't be stealing drugs from the hospital any more. His encounter with Clay in Pattaya opened the door to a much more lucrative opportunity.

It was Saturday morning, my team was playing away and I told Clare I was going to watch. In actual fact, Tommy and I were on the train to London to meet William in a bar near Borough Market on the south bank of the Thames.

William, the middleman

Borough Market is close to the south end of London Bridge, that's the ugly concrete one, not the ornate pretty one that opens up to let the ships through. The Brokerage was one of those trendy wine bars that seemed to appear whenever a bank branch got closed down and the lease

was going cheap. It was exactly like a scene from a spy movie. I went in first and got myself a seat at the bar. Tommy wanted me to watch out for trouble. I ordered a drink and casually looked around, trying to spot anyone who might be a drug dealer. I narrowed it down to the people on a couple of tables closest to the doors. Five minutes later Tommy walked in, studiously avoiding eye contact. He'd been instructed to wear a blue T-shirt and a Nike baseball cap and when he asked how he'd recognise William he was told he wouldn't have to. A slim white guy in a suit stood up and shook Tommy's hand as he tried to cross to the other corner of the bar. Contact was made but by a guy I ruled out as having anything to do with drugs. The man leant towards Tommy and said something quietly; that was when my mate beckoned for me to join them. It was obviously going really well, so I was smiling my friendliest smile as I got to the table.

Tommy looked glum.

"This is Mark. He said it'd be better if you joined us, because if you were still at the bar, looking that suspicious when William arrived, he'd probably drag you outside and kick the shit out of you."

I lost the smile and slid into the seat opposite our new friend. Mark didn't even look at me as he said, "Get some beers for fuck's sake, we haven't got all day."

I got back to the table just as a man I assumed must be William joined the group. He was West Indian and may have been the tallest and widest human being I ever set eyes on. Mark took his cue and made to leave, giving William what looked like a small salute and me and Tommy a look of complete disdain.

William raised his hand in a way that made it clear he was about to speak and we'd be unwise to interrupt.

“Each month you will get a text, it will have three numbers separated by hyphens. These are the different quantities you are being offered. After that will be three more numbers also separated by hyphens, they correspond to the quantities, and are the prices you pay for each amount. We give discounts for volume. You will text back how many you want to buy and then on the twenty-eighth of each month you come here at two p.m. Mark brings the goods and you bring the cash. If you fail to buy in two successive months you will not be offered merchandise again.”

He paused to drain two thirds of the beer in front of him.

“The cash should be rolled up and pushed inside those cylindrical containers they put potato chips in. The tubes should be in a TESCO carrier bag. Mark will have a similar bag with the goods. You simply have to exchange the bags.”

“How do we know there are drugs... sorry, goods, in the tubes?” Tommy asked.

“You don’t,” came the reply.

Tommy laughed. “So how will you know if there's any money in our bag?”

William reached inside his pocket and pulled out some photos. The first was a picture of my mum coming out of the LIDL supermarket in Whitehawk; the next was Clare standing by the hospital entrance. Tommy was still smiling at this stage. The next photo was a girl called Tina he dumped the week before, then the smile disappeared. The final picture was of the only girl Tommy really cared about. Sally was sweet, pretty and sixteen years old. She was Tommy’s little sister.

William spoke again. “There *will* be money in the bag. You’ll get your first text by the twentieth of next month. Understood?”

We both nodded a little too meekly given that we were trying to make an impression on a hardened drug dealer. Then William was gone. That feeling running down my spine was certainly fear but as I looked Tommy in the eye and he smiled, there was another feeling - pure exhilaration.

Tommy explained it was better if I did the collections, because during the week he could cover for me at the hospital. At weekends I could say I was watching the Albion or playing football for the Sunday team and Clare would be none the wiser. I stored the tablets in my spare sports bag under some old football shirts and waited for Tommy to confirm we had a customer. Then, having liberated a variety of containers from the hospital, I counted out the pills to make the onward delivery. In our first month we bought five hundred pills, the minimum, and had a hundred left over when the following month’s text arrived. In the month before Tommy died, we shifted thousands of pills and ran out of stock before we completed all the orders.

Tommy reckoned it took him months to build his client list. He took the orders and I just made the deliveries and collected the cash, which I had to return to Tommy without even counting it.

“Not that I don’t trust you mate. It’s just that if the cash is short, I need to be able to look the bloke in the eyes and say I opened the envelope myself. If I couldn’t do that, they’d be blaming any shortfall on you.”

I had no idea how much we were taking but it was plenty. Every week, Tommy gave me my cut of the profit and it was far more than I got from that poxy job at the hospital in a month.

I couldn't flash it about too much because Clare would want to know where I got it. She hated drugs, her little brother was a basket case, in and out of rehab all the time and dragging her family into it every time he got into trouble. He was doing six months in Lewes prison for possession and her family was relieved. He couldn't get them into any more trouble while he was locked up.

It took a few months before my share amounted to more than a bit of extra beer money and enough to slip my Mum some cash towards the household bills. Then it all took off; our customers couldn't get enough of the stuff. Tommy handed me a brown envelope as we pulled up in the car park at McDonalds. Sitting in a corner booth a few minutes later, I was still getting my head round how much money he'd given me. That's when he told me about Anwar. William strongly urged Tommy to meet the guy... under threat of cutting us off if he didn't.

There was a problem keeping all the cash we were taking in and anything foolish could easily draw attention to the whole arrangement. No way could it go in the bank and money laundering was tricky business. Apparently Anwar would take care of that for us.

"It's easy mate," Tommy explained. "A bloke in say; Bangalore, deposits cash with one of Anwar's network. Then as long as you know the password, you can go and pick it up in, say Paris."

Tommy looked at me as though he just answered all my prayers. I couldn't see for the life of me why that was

of any use at all. Tommy started on his burger, waiting for it all to click.

“No... don't get it mate. What's Bangalore got to do with anything?”

“It's just an example. He can stash our money and, when we want it, we can pick it up anywhere in the world.”

“So it's like a deposit account then?”

“Got it in one.” Tommy was delighted the message had finally sunk in.

“What's the interest like?” I asked, my confidence growing.

“Have you seen what the banks pay these days? It's peanuts. Anwar doesn't pay interest, but he doesn't charge us a fee either, unless we move the money abroad.”

I knew there'd be a catch.

“Sounds risky. Couldn't we just invest it?” I asked.

Tommy looked scornful.

“Same problem as with the banks. Besides, my Dad invested money and lost his shirt. Paid into a pension all his life then the company went bust. The bosses had cleaned out the pension scheme just before the firm went under. And he paid into one of those big insurance companies and they screwed him too. If he'd got any sort of pay out, the government would have had most of it back in tax anyway. It's why he never made his fiftieth birthday, the stress of it all killed him.”

I'd heard it was cheap blended whisky that did it, but I doubted Tommy wanted to hear that.

“This is dirty money; we need to keep it out of the system,” he said.

Tommy had just given me more cash than I'd ever seen in my life. Now he was suggesting I hand it over to

some bloke I'd never met, who'd take care of it for me, without the hassle of any unwanted paperwork. What could possibly go wrong? It sounded like a terrible idea, but I didn't have a better one. The decision was taken like all the others in our partnership.

"Well, I'm in," Tommy said, scooping up the last of his ketchup with a handful of fries.

"Yeah, I guess... me too," I replied, without the conviction that I had much of an idea what I'd just agreed to.

I had a plan. I would wait until I had enough money salted away, then I was going to tell Clare my lottery ticket came up. If I could pay my share, we could sell the flat and get a nice house somewhere. I hadn't quite worked out how I was going to maintain the deceit though. She was never going to accept me dealing drugs, not with all the problems she had with her brother. I never really thought past getting the house. Maybe I could claim it was a really big lottery win, then she wouldn't be surprised when the money kept flowing. Better still, Tommy and I'd make enough to start a proper business, maybe a pub or a restaurant, and we could ditch the dealing. Well that was the plan, but now I was on a plane to Thailand, Tommy was dead and Clare had dumped me for some rich bastard who lived in Spain; and guess how he made his money... by dealing drugs, that's how.

I'd seen how Clare's ex only needed to click his fingers to make her come running and I'd seen how a Brighton gangster could execute my mate and get away with it. That takes money and the easiest way to get money is by selling drugs. Thanks to Tommy I knew how to do that and then I'd see Clare and make sure she knew

what she was missing, then I'd reintroduce myself to Mr Connor, the man who killed my best friend.

The plane was on its approach to Suvarnabhumi, Bangkok's main airport. In an hour or so I'd be in a taxi to the city centre and the Nana Rose hotel. It was where Tommy and I started on my one and only previous trip. I phoned to make sure that they had plenty of rooms but decided making a booking beforehand was too risky. I'd stayed one step ahead of Connor's men so far and had no intention of letting my guard down.

CHAPTER TWO

Making my own way in the world

My village is near Buriram in Isaan, the eastern part of Thailand, not far from Cambodia. Most families are poor but I was very lucky. My papa had a job and took good care of my mama, me and my sister. He was my mother's second husband; my real papa left when I was just seven years old. My new papa made sure I went to school, studied hard and got my leaving certificate. I thought I had it made when seven years ago, just after my seventeenth birthday, my papa's friend got me a job in a fancy hotel in Khao Lak. It was short lived, in six months I would be back in my village. My first job there was in the kitchens, but I think they liked me and after only a few weeks they said I could be a trainee in the restaurant. I learned English at school and could speak a little bit. My new job let me practice too. My name is Tasanee Charanthea, but everyone calls me by my nickname, Yim. It is the Thai word for smile. My mama told me that was what everyone noticed about me when I was a baby, my smile.

At first I did not pay much attention to the tall, handsome young man who was waiting tables on the other side of the restaurant. Ghai had jet-black hair that was cut very short, he did not try to copy the pop stars on TV. And he had such a nice smile. I was first drawn to his perfect white teeth, then his eyes which were so big and round they almost made him look like a *farang*, that's what we

call westerners in Thailand. Ghai's eyelashes were so long I would look in the mirror and wish they were mine. His skin was light too, not dark like mine. Thai people all want light skin, it is the colour of the "HiSo"... High Society people from Bangkok, so much better than the deep brown skin of the people who work the fields of Isaan... my people.

I caught Ghai watching me a few times and he would smile nervously. That always made me put my hand over my mouth and giggle. I did not know what to say to him. Then he came to work on my side of the restaurant. Ghai had been at the hotel for two years already when I arrived. I was told I should do whatever he said, he was so kind and sweet it was not hard for me to do that. He had *jai dee*, that is Thai for "good heart". He was shy the same as me and we liked to speak English together. My papa had always frightened away any boys back in my village. Now I was on my own and could choose who I wanted to be with, and I wanted to be with Ghai, for sure. We saw each other every day and I was not looking forward to the Christmas holidays when I would have to go home to see my family. It would be the longest time we spent apart since our first meeting, and we wanted our last evening together to be very special. I had never been with a boy before. He asked me if I was sure. I said "one million per cent."

New Year is more important to Thai people than Christmas. We are Buddhists not Christians, but it is an excuse for gifts and time to be with family, to eat together and relax. *Sabai sabai*. Everyone wanted to know about my new job and who my new friends were since I moved to Khao Lak. I told them about the girls I met and then

mentioned there was a nice boy called Ghai who was teaching me what to do in the restaurant. It would be just three more days until I could see him again.

The Wave

“Come look at the TV,” shouted Pim, my little sister. “Where is that?”

“It looks like Thailand, maybe Phuket,” my papa said.

I rushed to the TV. It looked like Khao Lak to me, except not as I had ever seen it before. The wide sandy beaches were covered with debris, palm trees were ripped from the ground and the buildings close to the water’s edge were completely destroyed. There was a running banner at the bottom of the screen saying there had been a tsunami in the Indian Ocean and thousands of people were dead. I had never heard of the word tsunami. Whatever it was, it was not something that happened in Isaan, for sure. I did not know where the Indian Ocean was but maybe that meant it could not be Khao Lak after all. There are beaches like that all over the world, it would be too much of a coincidence if this had happened to the town where I worked. I was desperate to talk to Ghai, just in case ... to be sure he was safe. He would be able to explain about tsunamis and point out the Indian Ocean on a map for me. If I could only hear Ghai’s voice, then this gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach would go away. For sure.

“Where’s Sri Lanka?” Pim asked.

“Why?”

“They said on TV, the pictures are from Sri Lanka, that’s where it all happened.”

I was not sure where Sri Lanka might be, it sounded Thai like Sri Racha. They were interviewing survivors. A wave of relief burst through me, the people did not look Thai and they were speaking another language. This tsunami had happened somewhere else and my new home, the hotel and Ghai would all be safe. I was sure of that, one million per cent. I needed to calm down and relax, then this feeling of dread would go away.

“That’s definitely Phuket,” Papa exclaimed.

The banner changed at the bottom of the screen and the pictures were different. The faces looked more familiar; more Thai and when they interviewed a man who saw it all happen, I could understand every word. He was speaking my language, he was speaking Thai. The banner said they suspected thousands of people had been killed in Phuket. I tried to think where Phuket was in relation to Khao Lak but my brain would not work. Even if I knew the answer, I would not have been able to remember. Ghai did not have a telephone. I had no way of contacting him, no way of knowing if he was safe. I just had to hope that Khao Lak and Ghai had been spared. Then the banner changed again. The pictures looked much the same but this time there could be no doubt and I had the answer to my question, for sure. If I was in any doubt, the presenter put it into words for me.

“One of the worst hit towns on the Andaman coast is Khao Lak, where thousands of people are presumed dead and access for the rescue effort is being hampered by fallen trees and severely damaged roads, many of which have been washed away completely. Resources are reportedly stretched to the limit as search teams and medical workers are trying to handle the situation there as

well as in Phuket, little more than one hundred kilometres down the coast. These pictures are just in.”

A helicopter film crew flew low over the palm trees, it could easily have been the beachfront at the hotel, or any one of a hundred other beaches anywhere in Thailand. The knot in my stomach grew tighter still and I could feel the tears slide down my cheeks. My mama put her arms around me.

“Everything will be alright, you will see your friends again, for sure. We all have to give thanks you came to see your family. We are all so happy you are here and not at work. I think they would have big problems today.”

But Khao Lak was exactly where I wanted to be, with Ghai, wherever he might be. I could barely concentrate on the news reports now. Something happened under the sea and it caused a huge wave to hit the beach. It was still impossible to imagine water could have done all the damage we were seeing on TV. They explained that children and old people were most vulnerable as the water came in, they could not run or swim to safety. I felt ashamed but my heart soared. Ghai was very strong and a really good swimmer. We spent a few days on the beach and he loved to show off. He would hold his breath under water for ages, until I thought he must have drowned, then he would appear from nowhere, laughing at me. If anyone could survive the wave, it was Ghai. He just had to be safe.