

Chapter 13

GUN'S GROTTO

SUNDAY, 7 MARCH 1999

James is living a life of luxury, staying in an expensive apartment outside Chaweng. Sitting on his balcony and watching the sunset over the Samui hills, *Ministry of Sound* playing on his mini stereo and chilled Chang beer in our hands, James lays a thin strip of paper on the table and empties a cigarette into it. 'Shit!' he says, grinning. He always has a pleasant grin, like parrots and dolphins. 'We're out of weed.'

I look down at the half-made spliff. 'Can we get some more?'

'We can try.'

We jump on our motorbikes and stop at the 7-11 for more papers and beer. We take the regular shortcut through a cluster of go-go bars and onto a narrow ribbon of track that runs between two artificial lakes. The dusty path leads to a dark street parallel to the busy main road through Chaweng. We turn right. At the end of the street is the Reggae Pub. We turn left before the pub and take a succession of winding roads that lead to the dealer's door in a cul-de-sac of bungalows. James goes inside and comes back within one minute. He jumps on his motorbike.

'No luck?'

‘He’s just getting it.’

We sit and wait, listening to the cicadas in full voice here. A Thai man appears. He looks jumpy and suspicious. He hands James a small pouch of weed. James hands over some Thai baht. The man goes back indoors, and nothing is said. The exchange is complete within thirty seconds.

James is tasked with transporting the goods. It’s his turn. I carried last time. I ride ahead, my fingers poised over the indicator switch, my job to scan for police, and what happens if I see any, we talked about this, James, I will indicate left and right twice, you will heed my warning and throw the weed away, remember, pay attention. What if they suddenly jump out of the darkness? What if we’re caught, and they haul us to some hovel of a police station and shine a bare bulb on our faces, and they cross-examine us in different rooms, and we’re sweating, unsure how severe the penalties are, and I’m wondering if James is ratting me out, blaming everything on me, and he’s thinking the same, and we demand our one phone call, but we don’t know who to call, and then they lock us up for days, depriving us of food and human contact while we await our fate, which is thirty years in prison, and we beg for mercy, beg the king for a pardon, insisting that—

Concentrate. I scan left and right, looking deep into the undergrowth and between the wooden buildings for police officers lying in wait. Stories about careless foreigners getting banged up at the infamous Bang-Kwang prison in Bangkok for drug possession may have only been rumours, but we won’t take the risk. The sight of *farang* possessing drugs can send police eyes spinning into dollar signs. Foreigners risk arrest, detainment for days, \$2,000 fines, deportation and blacklisting from Thailand forever. So many have ruined their holidays and had their bank accounts emptied over drug busts, so we buy weed in small batches. We are less vulnerable and stand more chance of copping just a fine, although nothing’s guaranteed in this country.

After a few more weeks of living like a king, James is forced into poverty like the rest of us, no longer able to afford his apartment. It’s a difficult transition, regressing into third-world living conditions. I’m also homeless. I have to move out of Steve’s attic because he has family arriving, and my two wasted trips to Bangkok were an unexpected burden on my budget.

Gun from the Pink Lady offers us a room at her *motel* on the outskirts of town. She charges us £1 per night. We are overcharged. The premises sit on the same dust track as the Reggae Pub and reek of bin juice. It's as if an unpleasant breeze has blown in from a nearby garbage facility and never found a way out. The edifice is built out of paper-thin wood and corrugated iron. At the front is an outdoor bar and restaurant. Only Thais, not tourists, dine here. There are about eight rooms in the back. Gun shares a room with her fifteen-year-old daughter, and the other five rooms belong to her friends and family, leaving two rooms for James and me. I claim the room near the front, giving me the option of a quick and easy escape, while James draws the short straw and takes the one at the very back, where all manner of wildlife haunts dark corners.

My room is the size of a double bed. The bed is a rectangular concrete block resembling a sarcophagus. I buy a thin mattress to lay on top of my coffin and a cheap rail for my clothes. I'm left with one square metre in which to stand. I personalise the space by dropping my dirty pants on the floor and throwing a wet towel on the bed. The roof sags, just a little, like it's tired, and the walls are so thin I can hear people breathing on the other side. I don't have a window, and the door doesn't have a lock, so I worry about my valuables constantly. I quickly accustom myself to these primitive conditions, but James is still in a state of shock. He's gone from four-star accommodation to minus two.

'Have you seen the awful shower yet?' James asks.

'There's a shower?'

Well, a concrete cubicle where the shower and toilet occupy the same space. A big trough filled with cold tap water has pond skaters and a plastic ladle floating aimlessly on the surface. It's for flushing the toilet *and* taking a shower, both requiring the ladle. A gecko is crushed in the door jamb. For days, I watch a colony of ants strip the gecko's flesh until only its fragile skeleton remains. The same thing is happening to me, with malnutrition and sporadic diarrhoea wearing me down to skin and bone.

It gets worse.

The bar at the front attracts ladyboys every night. Let me be clear, I have nothing against ladyboys, called katoeys in Thailand. I do, however, have issues with *these* ladyboys. They stay at this bar every night, singing

karaoke until the sun rises. Whenever James and I cross paths with them, they undress us with their eyes and make crude remarks in English and Thai. It's amusing the first time. Even the second.

As for sleep, it becomes almost impossible. Instead, we have to listen to horrendous renditions of classic English songs and Thai pop music that sound like animals being skinned.

One night sees me being chased along the dark Samui streets, not by one but two ladyboys. I'm just trying to go home on my bike, but these two butch ladyboys with deep voices and acrylic nails wrapped around their handle grips have other ideas. They look menacing, leaning forward into the wind, trying to catch me up.

'Where you go?' growls one.

'You go Gree' Mango?'

I look over my shoulder through the dust spewing up from my tyres as two faces emerge from the cloud like spooky holograms, both as easy on the eye as bright light, so I twist the throttle to the max.

'I go wi' you, han'sun man.'

There has never been a more serious sub-culture than the Thai transgender community. These katoeys go to really extreme lengths to become beautiful. You only have to pop into Christie's Cabaret to see how they flaunt their beauty and sexuality. Some 180,000 ladyboys live in Thailand in 1999. The transformations are quite remarkable. Some men make stunning ladies. The only hint of their male past is their knuckles or Adam's apple. Still unsure? Do a voice analysis. Some are caught between masculinity and womanhood, their hormone pills proving ineffective, no matter how much gender reassignment surgery has been performed. Most katoeys are friendly and polite. The annoying ones, like those who sing outside my bedroom or pursue young men on their motorbikes late at night, make real nuisances of themselves.

'Where you s-tay, han'sun man?'

'Why you ri' away?'

Yikes, they're gaining on me, and I know I'm drunk, but not drunk enough, and there aren't enough pills in the world, but, you know what, I'm conscious enough to ride faster, fast enough to put some distance between me and the katoeys, but I can't shake them off my tail, and now

I've *had* enough, hey, leave me alone, I'm sure you're both lovely ladies and all, but please, I just want to sleep, okay, so if you wouldn't mind chasing someone else tonight, that would be wonderful. I keep on riding, glancing behind me, they're still there, still trying to tempt me with their unrelenting advances, not giving up, and when I see Gun's grotto up ahead, I speed towards it, my head angled down, shoulders hunched, leaning forward over the handlebars. I pull a skid outside, kicking up even more dust just as the ladyboys continue through the blizzard, spouting something in Thai, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

I turn towards the bar as the dust settles, and there, singing karaoke, are more ladyboys gripping microphones, the only other cylindrical object with a tapered end their acrylic nails will wrap around tonight.