

GENUINE

THAI

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SEAN BUNZICK

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1st edition ebook 2010

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ISBN 978-974-13-1700-4

eISBN 978-616-222-000-5



Published by

Internet: www.bangkokbooks.com

E-mail: info@bangkokbooks.com

Fax Thailand: (66) - 2 - 517 1009

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Thanks...

I'd just like to thank such long-term and professional writers as Jason Schoonover, Chris Moore and Dean Barrett for their kind support as I continue to write and get established in this particular branch of writing. Likewise, I have to thank Geoff at Thai Oasis (www.thaioasis.com) for the great reviews I've gotten on his website for my other novels and my friend Cent over at Thailand Stories (www.thailandstories.com) for running first chapters of my previous four novels on his website. It's people like all those mentioned above that make my already enjoyable job that much more sanuk! This list now includes George Gensbichler, the editor//big boss at Bangkok Books who couldn't have been any more receptive to such an odd-managerball script idea as the one within this novel! Kob khun mahk to all of you!

I'd also like to thank all my Thai and farang friends, especially those upcountry here in Chiang Mai, for backing me on this. None of you are writers but each and everyone of you continues to show me why I love living in Chiang Mai so much. The same thanks to my family and friends on the other side of the planet. Someday I might have a "real" job but frankly—I doubt it! Cheers!

PROLOGUE

“Are you all here?” he asked in a calm, quiet tone that nonetheless spoke of one used to being in command and control of any given situation life might hold for him.

Some of the girls just nodded but most of them said yes. Some of them answered with sarcasm, some with respect, some with fear, all with Isaan accents from Thailand’s northeast region. The accent was as it should be.

All five girls were there, as they should be.

He’d known this in advance, of course he had—*he’d* arranged for it to happen. This was simply his way of seeing what kind of reaction he’d get from them the first time they were together in the same room where all five would be awake and aware of the others at the same time.

It was all part of his great experiment, a project he’d been putting together for some time with US dollars, British pounds and Euros at whatever the conversion rate was for the Thai *baht*.

“Are you all ready for your very important jobs?” He asked this with the same voice tone but now one could also hear his eager anticipation to get this experiment into the first stage where *he* would no longer have *complete* control over the situation.

More agreement came from the girls.

One reached into her brand new purse for a pack of Marlboro Lights and shook a cigarette out, tapping it, lighting it and inhaling with bored, practiced ease. This was interesting, as she’d never smoked a cigarette before in her entire life.

He took note of this event, smiling at the irony of it.

“Please go back to your rooms. I’ll call you back here one at a time to explain what it is I want of you next. Can you lovely girls do that for me?”

Of course, they could—and did.

What each girl was called back for into the dim room where little could be perceived (as he’d intended all along) was to be told where

she was going to go next, more or less what she was going to do next and what her name would be.

The first girl heard all this and nodded when he told her she would be Lek-1.

“Now please remember—, my sweet, that you will *always* be Lek—along with the full Thai first and last name on your national ID card as well as your Thai passport—but to *no one but me*—or my few associates—will you *ever* tell anyone you are ‘Lek-1’. *Kowjai mai?*”

“I understand,” the girl answered, going for another cigarette. She carried a little sarcasm but not too much.

He had no problem with her smoking; it was an expected habit he’d suspected most if not all of the five *pooying* would get. When he considered their original background, this certainly wasn’t a surprise to him.

“Then you may be on your way, Lek-1. Please gather all your belongings from your room and then head off to your destination, okay *mai?*”

“Of course,” she replied, leaving.

By the time he was finished, all five girls knew their numbers. *All* were named Lek. As it should be.

He laughed heartily as the last girl left a little over an hour later, inhaling on a quality Havana cigar. So far, all was going as well as he’d hoped it would on a project of such ramifications.

As it should be.

CHAPTER 1

A few hours later, Lek-1 casually got out of a *tuk-tuk*, paying the fellow Isaan driver what he'd asked for in *baht* that she'd been given before leaving the building ahead of Lek-2—6.

The twenty-something driver of the three-wheeled taxi laughed with her, checking out her curvaceous ass as she left him on Soi 23 to stroll with casual nonchalance into Soi Cowboy. He'd had a feeling she was a working girl when he'd seen her waving him down for a ride further up on Sukhumvit. She just had that look about her. He wouldn't have minded taking her for a fuck—and maybe even a decent blowjob—but most 'ying coming to Cowboy either didn't go with Thai men or else they already had a boyfriend who they'd disguise as a "brother" to typically ignorant *farang* men who never seemed to learn shit about the *real* Thailand.

Sighing, the driver slipped the *baht* into his wallet, trying to get another customer at the Soi 23 entrance to the red light district but seeing as it was about 2:30 in the afternoon, there wasn't much hope in that. The only people here were employees, bar owners and those who worked the alleyway of go-go bars as food vendors, flower sellers or touts looking to nail shitfaced *farang* who were too *khee-mao* to have a clue what they were doing. Another sigh and the *tuk-tuk* driver moved on. In Bangkok, sooner or later, there was *always* someone looking for a ride.

Lek-1 strolled up the small lane, projecting an expression of boredom and that of a girl who knew these kinds of places as well as any other bargirl. Considering that Lek-1 had never been here—or *any other red light district*—before, made her act that much more impressive.

She nodded at some girls, said hello to others but mostly she kept her trap shut with her eyes fixed on something that was far beyond anything else she was supposedly looking at. This got her up Soi Cowboy with few interruptions—as *he'd* wanted.

Not far from Country Road, the last bar on the right side of the *soi*

before one ended up on Soi 21—Asoke Rd—Lek-1 found that which she'd been instructed to find.

It was a little go-go bar next to Tilac Bar.

Unlike the long-term Tilac Bar, Drunk Crossover wasn't a bar that had been in business on the Cowboy too long but for whatever reason, it also didn't radiate the fresh feeling one often got when seeing a brand new bar.

Drunk Crossover had been opened up about one year earlier but since then, its appearance had gone downhill faster than an ice cream cone dropped on Sukhumvit at high noon. Two flower boxes held dead plants plus some obnoxiously obvious fake flowers. The bar's glass was months away from being properly clean. One tube was cracked and never worked right once sunset hit the strip with neon lighting taking over. There were cigarette packs, butts, dead lighters and beer bottle caps scattered amidst the pair of tables and chairs outside the entrance. The last "attraction" of this dump was a mound of puke covering a condom packet. No one had bothered to clean up any of this mess even though it was now well over twelve hours since Drunk Crossover had closed its doors for another less-than-successful evening of business.

Despite all of this, Lek-1 knew this was where she had to go.

It had all been explained to her before she'd been taken out of Ban Yai—Big House. She knew she had no choice in the matter but even as she pushed open the door and walked into a bar with no interior lights on, the smell of a Thai cigarette and Britney Spears wailing away in a language Lek-1 couldn't speak too well, Lek-1 could already feel the rebellion coming to life in her unique blood.

This was as *he'd* intended.

"Does a bar with no lights on *usually* entice you to just stroll in and then stare at everything in sight without saying a goddamn word?" asked a raspy female voice from somewhere in the back of Drunk Crossover. The accent was Isaan, as it normally would be in a place like Soi Cowboy, but to Lek-1, the voice didn't sound like it came from Roi Et, *her* home.

"Is somebody in here?" Lek-1 asked, feeling like a complete idiot even as the stupid question came out of her mouth.

"Yeah, *tilac*, a fucking ghost," the hoarse voice snapped back. A couple seconds later, a middle-aged mama-san who looked to have been in the business since the 19th Century came from the back of the otherwise deserted bar, her eyes squinting at Lek-1.

"*Sawadee ka*," Lek-1 greeted her politely but didn't bother with

the two-handed gesture of respect called a *wai*.

“*Sawadee ka* to you, too, girlie.” The mama-san took a drag on her Krung Thep, carelessly tapping ash onto the floor. “Can I help you?” she asked in a manner that let both of them know that she understood exactly what Lek-1 was here for.

“Maybe you can,” Lek-1 replied with her own tone that would never have gone down too well in upper class Thai society. “Are you hiring any *new* bargirls?”

The mama-san shrugged. “Maybe. Either way, even if *I* decide to hire you, it’s our *farang* big boss that has to make the final call. He’s kind of funny that way. Still, let me check you out.”

Going behind the horseshoe-shaped bar, she put on some of the bright lights that lit up the poles where the bargirls danced at night. To Lek-1, the mama-san looked even worse in the light but that wasn’t important to her now. The mama-san’s opinion was.

“Hmm. Well, I’ve gotta admit, you *are* a pretty one. Where are you from?”

“The Isaan.”

“No shit, *chowying*. Where in the Isaan? Almost all of us on Soi Cowboy are from the Isaan.”

“Roi Et.” Which, to a degree, *was* true.

“‘LA Girl’, huh?” This was a joke amidst the locals because people often mispronounced *Roi Et* as *Loi Et* so the pun became “LA”.

“When did you get into Krung Thep, kid?” Krung Thep is what the Thai people prefer to call the capital instead of “Bangkok”. Even as she asked this question, the mama-san had a feeling “Miss LA” had been in the trade a while. She had that walk and lack of fear that you’d never find on some ‘*ying* fresh off the bus from the rice paddies of the poor northeast.

“A little while ago. A good friend of mine told me this would be a good place for me to come for a job.”

“Do you mean Soi Cowboy or Drunk Crossover?” The way the mama-san said it announced that if it was the latter, either Lek-1 was screwing with her or Lek-1’s friend who’d recommended Drunk Crossover was a complete blithering moron.

“She said both.” Lek-1 kept her voice mellow.

Mama-san raised a decidedly unattractive eyebrow. “*Really?* What’s her name, honey?”

“Noi.”

The other woman took almost a minute to stop guffawing. “Well, *that* really narrows it down, eh? ‘Noi’? Damn, ‘*ying*, nearly every

other girl here is named Noi. It's as original as your name probably will be, right? And *you're* called—?"

"Lek." She knew much better than to say "Lek-1". The number was private business that only she needed to know about.

"See, I told you." The mama-san finished her smoke and crushed it out against the bar before dropping it without a worry onto the already less-than-pristine floor. She leaned closer to Lek-1. "And is she *still* working here? Sorry, *Lek*, but we have uhm, let me think about this, four, maybe *five* Nois working here, *kowjai mai*?"

Lek-1 shrugged. "I think she went off with a *farang* to the UK but she wasn't sure if it'd happen or not the last time I spoke with her on the phone. She was waiting on a visa."

Mama-san sighed again. "Not easy to get a visa for the UK. It's as bad as the US." She got even closer to Lek-1. "Look, kiddo, I probably shouldn't even say this but who are we kidding here, huh?"

Lek-1 stiffened at this. "What do you mean by that?"

"Come on, get real. This isn't much of a bar, I think you can see it for yourself, can't you?"

Lek-1 had no answer for this.

Mama-san went on. "Look, *nongsao*, even if you *do* have a friend named Noi here, I think you should give this place a miss. It sucks and no, I'm *not* referring to what some of our '*ying* will do with the *farang*."

Now Lek-1 was confused. This commentary made no sense at all. "Why are you saying that? You *are* the mama-san here, *chai, mai*?"

"Sad but true."

"Then why are you shitting all over this place to keep me out? If you've got *too* many girls or business is off or something like that, then tell me."

"No, we don't have too many girls, Lek. Still, you *are* right about business not being so good. This is one of the worst-run bars on Soi Cowboy, *nairnorn*. The Long Gun, right across the *soi* from us, makes more in one night than we make in over two weeks."

"Why are you telling me this?" Lek-1's suspicions were running even higher.

Mama-san shook out a new cigarette, offering the pack to Lek-1. "Want one?"

"No, thanks. I've got my own."

Both women lit up and inhaled.

Lek-1 waited to see what Mama-san's answer might be. Despite everything she'd been told at Ban Yai, this kind of reception was about

the last thing she'd expected to find in Drunk Crossover.

"I'm telling you this, Lek, because frankly, I think you can do a lot better than this dump. A *shitload* better." Mama-san held up a defensive hand. "I just met you and I'm seeing a very beautiful girl in a city crawling with them. No, don't snap back—I'm *not* going to go into that tired old 'You're the most beautiful girl I've *ever* seen in Thailand so why are you wasting your life *here*?' cliché. Uh-uh. You *are* attractive, you're *not* new to the trade and you *don't* cower in dread. Sure, I *have* seen prettier girls but the big plus for you is that you strike me as being as tough as any of them that I've met and as you can see, I *have* been in this business a long time. Too goddamn long..." Her last words were a harsh whisper.

"And you think I shouldn't be looking for work here, huh?" Of all the things *he* had mentioned at Ban Yai, this wasn't one of them.

Mama-san almost touched her, saw the look in her eyes and gave it a pass. "If this is what you're going to do with your life, why not go for something that will take better care of you, little one?"

"Maybe it's because I like a challenge," Lek-1 answered. This sentence carried no hostility within it. As bizarre an idea as it was to her, it was one which Lek-1 suddenly found herself fancying. She'd been *instructed* to come to Drunk Crossover but now within her heart, she *wanted* to be here and moreover, to *succeed* at Drunk Crossover. Deep in her heart, she somehow knew she would.

"That's something you'll definitely get here," Mama-san admitted.

"Why? What is it with this bar that feels like suicide? Why aren't you making a decent profit? And why does this place look so shitty anyway? We *are* Thai and Thai people *do* like cleanliness, *chai mai*?"

"Have a seat, Lek, and I'll tell you if you really want to hear it."

Lek-1 did so, sitting at one of the barstools.

Seeing this, Mama-san nodded before heading to where the DJ booth was and silencing Britney. This move pleased both of them. With the Top 40 crap banished for the moment, Mama-san returned to sit on the barstool next to Lek-1's.

"This bar's been through a lot of names before it became Drunk Crossover and it's been through a lot of owners before it got one Alan Snyder to become the most *recent farang* owner." Mama-san's face twisted with displeasure as she said the Western name that probably few bargirls could even pronounce right. "Khun Alan bought it almost a year ago. He's from Brisbane, Australia and I personally think he's