
18+
SASHA S. SHERB
DON'T TAKE THE
Mangoes
СОДЕРЖИТ НЕЦЕНЗУРНУЮ БРАНЬ
LE #2: DON'T FALL FOR THE BOSS.
18+

Саша Щербетова

Don`t take the Mangoes

«Автор»
2026

Щербетова С.

Don`t take the Mangoes / С. Щербетова — «Автор», 2026

She told off a tourist in flip-flops. Five minutes later he was her boss. His business partners turned out to be the mafia.Zuza has twenty-one days left on her visa and one last interview. When an American hogs the only outlet in the lobby, she gives him a piece of her mind. Then he sits down in the CEO's chair and hires her.Grant Reed smiles at everyone and never lets anyone see that his company is on the hook to the Bangkok mafia. Polite Khun Somchai brings mangoes to the office, and whoever eats his mangoes owes him. Zuza has already eaten hers.When one of Somchai's men starts waiting for her at her gate, Zuza moves into her boss's penthouse under a contract she wrote herself. Rule number one: no walking around shirtless. Rule number two: what happened after the club never happened. Grant breaks the first one that same night. The second one they break together.A spicy Bangkok boss romance: grumpy heroine, sunshine hero, forced proximity, happy ending. 18+

© Щербетова С., 2026
© Автор, 2026

Содержание

Don't Take the Mangoes 5
Content Note 6
Chapter 1. Zuza 7
Chapter 2. Grant 12
Chapter 3. Zuza 17
Chapter 4. Grant 23
Chapter 5. Zuza 30
Chapter 6. Grant 36
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 39

Саша Щербетова
Don`t take the Mangoes

Don't Take the Mangoes

© 2026 Sasha S. Sherb

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced without the author's written permission.

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events are imaginary, and any resemblance to real people is coincidental.

Content Note

This book is for adult readers. It contains explicit, on-page sex scenes, strong language, mafia threats, guns and a shootout.

Nobody dies. Happily ever after guaranteed.

Chapter 1. Zuza

I had twenty-one days left on my visa. I counted them again while the Skytrain crawled over Sukhumvit, Bangkok's main drag, which runs all the way to Pattaya. Rooftops hung with other people's laundry slid by. A golden temple spire stuck up between two glass towers like a candle on a cake.

The number didn't change. Four years behind a bank counter had taught me that you can't talk numbers into anything. You can only correct them, and correcting this one was exactly what I was on my way to do.

The morning was cool. Tourists don't believe that. To them Bangkok feels the same in November as it does in April, and they laugh when locals put on jackets at seventy-five degrees. I laughed too, back in May, when I'd just landed.

Six months later I stood on the Asok platform in a thin cardigan, bundled up and weirdly happy about it. Then the sun cleared the roofs and reminded me that the cool here never lasts. Like a sale at the mall.

Today was the last interview on my list. Honestly? It was the first one in two weeks that had bothered to call me in.

The company was Reed Logistics. The job was "personal assistant to the managing director." The ad asked for "high stress tolerance" and "fast-paced environment." I'd read enough job ads to know that "fast-paced environment" usually means the last assistant ran.

Fine. I'm good at running, too. I also know how to stay, if there's something worth staying for.

The interview was at ten, and I showed up at nine twenty. Not out of nerves, although the nerves were there too. I had a plan. I always have a plan. I got that from my mother, along with the habit of folding plastic bags into little triangles. This plan had two items: change my blouse and charge my phone.

The phone part is a story I'm still a little embarrassed about. I'm not the kind of person who walks around on one percent and begs strangers for a charger.

Yesterday Mali, my friend from language school, dragged me to Ko Lan, an island half an hour by ferry from Pattaya. "Six months no sea, this is crime against yourself, ka," she said. We rented a jet ski. Mali drove like her life depended on it, and I sat behind her filming. On a turn a wave threw us up. I flew off into the water and slammed my thigh into the side of the jet ski.

On the bus back I killed my power bank sending Mali a video of her own screaming. Then at night a thunderstorm rolled over the guesthouse, and the landlady, Auntie Noi, did what she always does. She shut off the electricity for the whole house, "so the lightning can't find the wires." I woke up with eleven percent on my phone and a bruise the size of my hand.

The Skytrain ate another seven percent. But I knew the lobby of any business center on Sukhumvit has outlets, and showing up forty minutes early was the grown-up thing to do.

My résumé was on paper, in a folder. But the reference letter from my old job, my portfolio and my emails with the recruiter were all on my phone. If the recruiter called to say the meeting had moved to another floor, I wanted to know.

The lobby turned out to be huge and cold, with a marble floor that reflected the lights and sofas the color of wet sand. The AC was cranked to arctic, like every AC in this city, as if the building had something to prove to the street. The sweat I'd worked up on the walk turned into a thin icy film down my back.

I found the restroom, locked myself in a stall and changed into my spare blouse. Then I went out to the mirror and looked at myself the way I used to look at bills. Against the light. Carefully. Checking for a fake.

The girl in the mirror looked like someone I'd trust with my calendar. Black hair, thick and heavy, like the Thai girls all around me. Mali told me on day one that with hair like that I'd pass for a local, as long as I didn't turn around. From the front, I didn't. The hair was the only Asian thing about me.

Everything else came from my father's mother. Pale skin that had refused to tan after six months of Bangkok sun and had only gone pink on the cheekbones. Wide-set green eyes my ex used to call "cat eyes" when he wanted something. I didn't like that word anymore.

The white blouse, buttoned all the way up except the top button, fit well but pulled a little across my chest. In office clothes, a C cup is more of a problem than a blessing. At the bank I wore a blazer even in summer, so customers would look at my face through the glass and not lower.

The navy pencil skirt hit a hand's width above the knee. Short for an interview, and that was a decision, not an accident. Under it, sheer nude pantyhose, which in this heat is practically heroic. Without them, yesterday's bruise would have shown above my knee, yellow and purple, like the sunset over Ko Lan. The low black pumps I'd brought from home specifically for interviews.

Last night Mali had looked over my outfit and called it boring. "Wear shorter skirt or blouse with neckline," she said, and winked. "Men directors, easier for them to decide."

I told her I didn't take shortcuts. Then I hemmed the skirt up anyway. A little leg makes any interviewer friendlier. I knew that from the bank. The neckline I kept to myself. Laying all your cards on the table on day one is unprofessional. What would I have left for my six-month review?

I straightened my collar and smiled at the mirror. The smile looked more threatening than friendly, so I decided that was a plus in an assistant. Then I went to find an outlet.

There was only one outlet in the lobby. I checked everywhere: columns, the security desk, the wall by the elevators, the potted ficuses that in a normal building always hide at least one. This one was tucked in the wall behind a corner sofa, and somebody's white cord was already plugged into it.

The cord ran across the floor to the sofa. On the sofa, half reclined, phone at his ear, sprawled a man I took at first for a lapse in building security.

He was wearing flip-flops. Ordinary black rubber flip-flops, the kind every 7-Eleven sells for ninety-nine baht. I knew the price because I'd bought a pair myself my first week here. Faded khaki shorts. A T-shirt that said "Same Same But Different," the one every tourist buys on Khao San Road the first night, along with a Chang beer and the conviction that he finally understands Thailand.

He'd stretched his legs across the walkway. To reach the outlet I had to step over them, holding my skirt.

"Ty, no," he was saying into the phone, loud and so cheerful he could have been announcing a lottery win. "No. I'm not giving you money for a bar with live fish under a glass floor. Because the fish will die and you'll cry. Remember the turtle?"

He laughed, low and with such open pleasure that the guard by the turnstiles looked up. People don't laugh like that in business center lobbies. At nine in the morning they stare into laptops with expressions of deep importance and pretend they're already in a meeting. This man laughed like he was in a hammock on Ko Lan. For a second I felt offended on behalf of everyone who'd gotten up at six.

I stood next to him and politely waited for him to notice me. He noticed. He looked up, smiled and held up one finger, the universal "one sec," then turned to the window and went on with his call. As if his finger had signed a contract with me.

"I'm not mad, Ty. I'm just saying no. Those are different things. Yes. No. What do you mean, 'a little'? How much is 'a little'?"

I looked at my screen. Four percent.

While he haggled over the size of "a little," I looked him over. Big mistake.

His tan was even, the kind you don't get from two weeks of vacation, and the sun-bleached hair on his forearms glowed gold. No watch. His dark hair was a bit long for an office but cut so neatly it probably cost more here than a week of my rent at Auntie Noi's.

Under the stupid T-shirt I could make out wide shoulders and a back I wanted to get my hands on. Just to check whether it was as hard as it looked.

He sat with his knees spread wide, completely indifferent to who was looking at him. I looked. My eyes went where I'd told them not to go and confirmed that the shorts fit him very, very well. He had something under them to be proud of, it seemed. I turned red enough that the AC stopped helping.

I'm twenty-seven years old. Six months ago, two days before my wedding, I found texts on my fiancé's phone from Aneta, my best friend since school. And photos from his car. I left the ring on the kitchen table and flew to the other side of the world to start over.

Starting it by staring at tourists' zippers hadn't been in the plan.

"Excuse me," I said in English.

He nodded at me without looking up from the phone and said something into it about a "business plan on a napkin."

"Excuse me," I said again, louder. "I need the outlet. Your phone is already charged, I think."

He looked down at the screen. So did I, over his shoulder. Ninety-eight percent.

"Oh," he said. "Ty, hold on a sec."

And that was all he did. He put the phone back to his ear and kept listening to his brother, smiling at whatever he was being told. I'd become part of the furniture. One more sofa the color of wet sand, ignored until you need to sit down.

Three percent. Shit.

I don't make scenes. Eight hours a day I sat behind the glass of a teller window and smiled at people who tossed crumpled bills into my tray and called me "hon" like it was my name. I smiled at the retiree who counted his change three times. I smiled at the man in the leather jacket who spent fifteen minutes explaining to me how my own bank worked.

I didn't make a scene even over Aneta. I just put the ring down next to the salt shaker and bought a ticket.

All those scenes I hadn't made had been piling up inside me like loose change in a piggy bank. Now the piggy bank had found a reason to smash itself open. The reason sat in front of me in ninety-nine-baht flip-flops.

"You know," I said, "I understand it is comfortable here. Air conditioning, soft sofa, free Wi-Fi. But this is a business center, people work here. A hotel with a pool, if you want, is across the street."

He slowly lowered the phone.

"That is not all," I went on, because the piggy bank was broken and there was no stopping the coins now. "Since you are here, free advice. When you go outside, a tuk-tuk driver will come and offer to take you to the Grand Palace for five hundred baht. He will say the palace is closed for foreigners today, but he knows another temple, much better, and on the way he will stop at the jewelry shop of his cousin, where they will sell you a sapphire made of bottle glass. Don't say yes. Only people in such T-shirts pay five hundred baht for tuk-tuk."

The lobby went so quiet I could hear the air conditioner hum. The guard by the turnstiles stopped chewing.

The man looked down at his T-shirt, carefully, as if reading the slogan for the first time. Then he looked up at me.

His eyes turned out to be gray, lighter than I'd expected on such a tanned face, almost clear, like the water in the shallows off Ko Lan. Little lines had gathered in the corners. He was trying with everything he had not to laugh, and losing.

"Ty," he said into the phone, "I'll call you back. I'm getting a life lesson over here."

He hung up, leaned over the back of the sofa and yanked his cord out of the outlet. Then he offered me the outlet with a flourish, the way a waiter in a good restaurant pulls out your chair.

"Ma'am."

"Thank you," I said, in the voice I used at the bank to tell customers their card had been blocked, and plugged in my charger.

The phone beeped and showed one percent. I sat down on the edge of the next sofa with my back to him and stared at the screen, as if my look could fill the battery faster. My cheeks were burning. I'd just scolded a stranger like he was a schoolboy. Somewhere in my head, my mother was shaking hers. Mali, naturally, was applauding.

"So how much should you pay?" he asked behind my back.

"What?"

"For a tuk-tuk. If not five hundred."

I didn't turn around.

"Eighty. A hundred, if at night. And agree about the price before you sit."

"Eighty," he repeated thoughtfully, like he was taking notes. "Have you been here long?"

"Long enough."

"Do you work in this building?"

"I hope I will."

"Oh," he said for the second time, and I could hear that he was smiling. I wanted to throw my résumé folder at him. "Good luck. I hope they hire you. You're very persuasive."

My phone came alive and buzzed in my hand. Mali had sent a message: "Smile kitten, you super sexy when you smile. And very scary when not. Love you, kaaaa." Right after it came a photo of her cat, Biscuit, in a necktie she'd tied on him for some reason.

I didn't smile. I typed: "Too late. Already scared one. A tourist." Mali answered with three crying-laughing emojis and immediately asked the question I didn't answer: "Handsome?"

I tried to tell Mali "no" and couldn't. Even in that T-shirt. He had a tanned neck with a white strip at the collar, as if he'd spent all of yesterday out on a boat. And the kind of voice I'd want reading me my credit card agreement out loud. I'd have listened down to the last line of fine print.

I kept my back to him and could still feel him there, the way you feel the sun through closed eyelids. It was stupid. And stupidity, as I'd found out six months ago, is expensive. It had cost me a wedding dress, a restaurant for a hundred and twenty guests and a friend I'd shared everything with since first grade. As it turned out, everything.

The leather of the sofa creaked behind me. I didn't turn around. The flip-flops slapped across the marble toward the elevators, unhurried, like their owner was out for a walk on the beach. Then everything went quiet except the AC and my heart, which was still going way too fast.

At ten to ten a girl with a Reed Logistics badge came up to me. She was small, in a perfectly pressed white blouse, with a face so calm I envied her at once.

"Miss Zuzanna? I am Pim, the office manager. Please come with me."

I unplugged my phone, which had reached twelve percent by then, grabbed my folder and followed her. The elevator took us to the twenty-third floor so fast my ears popped. Pim smiled silently. I watched my reflection in the mirrored door and ran through the answers to the questions asked at every interview in the world. Why Thailand. Why did you leave your last job. Where do you see yourself in five years.

In five years I saw myself right here. With a work visa. With my own apartment, where they don't cut the power because of a thunderstorm. And without men who lie.

The office turned out to be made of glass. The walls of the meeting rooms were transparent, and you could see the whole floor through them: desks, monitors, people in shirts, a coffee machine where two of them were arguing about something, waving papers. I liked it. After finding out the truth on someone else's phone, I'd grown to love places where you can see everything.

Pim led me into a corner office. The window looked out on rooftops, on the green square of Benchakitti Park with its lake, and on the gray ribbon of an expressway with cars crawling along it. A large desk stood by the window with a high-backed chair behind it. On the desk lay a stack of folders, a laptop and a small wooden elephant with its trunk raised, for luck.

"Please, have a seat. The director will be with you shortly."

I sat across from the empty chair, put the folder on my knees and straightened my back. I'd pictured the director clearly: an older American in a suit, with a watch worth more than my last apartment, who looked straight through assistants and called them "sweetie." I'd already decided I'd forgive the "sweetie" if he sorted out my visa.

The door opened behind me, and I knew his steps before I turned. Slap. Slap. Rubber on laminate.

He walked past me without a word. In his hand was a clear plastic 7-Eleven cup of iced americano, the plainest kind, forty baht, with a green straw. I knew that cup. I used to buy one every morning when I wanted to feel like an adult instead of spending a hundred and fifty baht at a coffee shop. He smelled of americano and the same citrus I'd caught in the lobby.

He went around the desk and set the cup on the stack of folders, leaving a wet ring on the top one. Then he dropped into the high-backed chair and crossed one leg over the other. A bare tanned ankle, a flip-flop hanging off his big toe and swinging.

The flip-flop, by the way, had seen better days. A gray rim of street dust ran along the edge of the sole, and a blade of grass was stuck between the strap and his toe. I looked at that blade of grass and couldn't look away, because looking at his face was even scarier.

All the color drained out of my face and settled in my stomach. Cold.

He was silent. He leaned back, laced his fingers over his stomach and looked at me. Calmly, for a long time, without a smile and without anger, the way you look at something you're thinking of buying while you work out whether you'd be overpaying. I held his gaze for about three seconds, then dropped my eyes to my lap.

The pantyhose. The bruise under them suddenly felt the size of Ko Lan.

He leaned forward, pulled open a desk drawer, rummaged in it and took out a charger. A white cord, the same one. He laid it on the desk in front of me, next to my folder, and nudged it toward me with one finger. The outlet was by the leg of the desk, on my side.

I'd been braced for anything. For him to throw me out the door. For him to say something about tourists and beaches in my own tone. I'd expected revenge, and I got a phone charger. That threw me even more than the director's chair.

Before I'd decided anything, I'd plugged in my phone. Twelve percent. He'd seen me in the lobby, hunched over my one percent.

Only after that did he open my folder and run his eyes down the first page. He lingered on the photo, then lifted his light gray eyes to me. The little lines in their corners gathered again.

"Oh," he said for the third time that morning, and reached his hand across the desk to me. "Miss Zuzanna? Grant Reed. So, do you ride tuk-tuks at night often?"

Chapter 2. Grant

In the end, she did shake my hand. Hers was cold from the lobby AC, and the grip was short and firm. It was the handshake of someone who checks your ID first and smiles later.

She didn't smile. She did start to blush. The color climbed from her buttoned collar to her cheekbones so slowly I had time to follow it up. I enjoyed it a little, I'll admit, while I waited for my answer.

"I do not…" she started, and stopped. "I mean, sometimes. A hundred baht."

A second later she heard what she'd said, and the blush made it to her ears.

"It is the price," she explained. "The night rate. I don't ride. I go home when Skytrain is already closed, and this happens only when… Never mind when."

I nodded with a straight face, like a man who'd just heard a woman quote her own rates. Downstairs I'd barely held it together too. But down there she'd been standing over me with one hand on her hip, scolding me, and with every right. Up here she sat with a folder on her knees, burning to the tips of her ears, tangled up in her own fare schedule. Laughing at her now would've been unfair.

She must have felt that, because she sat up straight and went looking for something to grab. Some way to win back a little of her morning advantage. Her eyes landed on my cup.

"You put a wet cup on the folders," she said, in the exact voice she'd used half an hour ago to tell me about sapphires made of bottle glass. "It will leave a ring."

Somewhere in the middle of the sentence she remembered whose folders these were, and whose desk. Her eyebrows twitched. Anyone else would have shut up and pretended she'd said nothing. She seemed to be the type who starts counting a stack of bills and finishes the count even after she's seen it's short.

She opened her folder, took out a paper napkin folded in quarters, leaned across the desk and blotted the ring on a customs declaration.

The top button of her blouse was undone, and when she leaned forward the collar fell open. Just for a second. I saw the hollow between her breasts, pale, where the Bangkok sun had never reached. An edge of white lace. I caught the smell of plain soap, no perfume on top of it. I looked up at the ceiling so fast I found a smoke detector I'd never once noticed in three years in that office. I studied it down to the last screw until she sat back.

She didn't notice a thing. She folded the napkin wet side in, put it back in her folder and straightened up, looking like a woman who'd restored order to at least one square foot of this office.

I moved my cup onto the turtle coaster Ty had given me. For the first time in a month, I wished I were wearing a blazer. A blazer has pockets. Somewhere to stash your hands when you're amused and embarrassed at the same time. In shorts all you can do is lace your fingers over your stomach and pretend it's on purpose.

Thirty minutes ago I knew nothing about her except one percent on a phone and some suspiciously accurate knowledge of tuk-tuk fares. Now I knew her name from the résumé. I knew she carried napkins folded in quarters. And weirdly, the napkins felt like the bigger deal.

I'd gone up to my office from the lobby and tossed the charger in a drawer when Pim reminded me my ten o'clock candidate was already downstairs. I didn't connect the two. Ty was still in my head.

Ty had asked for money for a bar with fish in the floor. I'd said no, and he'd said, "Okay, bro, forget it." That "forget it" bugged me. When he was twelve, my brother followed our dad around for three days with magazine clippings until Dad gave in and bought him a turtle. Two years ago, when he was opening his bar on Thonglor, he called me every night until I signed the check. Ty didn't know how to give up after a first no.

On the way up to the twenty-third floor I'd been trying to figure out where he could have found the money, now that my money had suddenly stopped mattering. I didn't like any of my answers.

To clear my head I'd gone back down and out the back entrance to the 7-Eleven for an iced americano. My father drank coffee his whole life out of a china cup his secretary brought him. As a kid I could tell from the clink of the saucer through the office door that it was a bad time to go in. I drink out of a forty-baht plastic cup and go get it myself. It's one of the few habits I'm proud of, no footnotes needed.

When I got back to the floor, she was already sitting in my office. The walls are glass, and I saw her from the hallway, from Pim's desk: straight back, folder on her knees, knees together. I stopped with the cup in my hand and stood there for maybe a minute. I had a pretty good idea what was coming, and I was already a little bored by it.

She would turn around, recognize me and start apologizing. Or she'd say she'd sensed the director in me right away and just hadn't wanted to interrupt my call. I'd heard more flattery this past month than in the previous ten years. New managers laughed at my jokes before I got to the point. The driver admired my flip-flops. Pim silently ordered yet another nameplate for the assistant's desk.

So I walked in without a word. I wanted to see what she'd do when she figured out who I was, and I had no intention of helping her.

The charger was the same story. I didn't need it. She'd had one percent in the lobby, and I remembered the look on her face when she stared at that number, so I wanted to take the problem off her hands. But I was also curious what she'd do with my kindness. Thank me, apologize, or pretend nothing had happened downstairs.

She took the cord without a single "thank you," plugged in her phone and looked at me like we were even now. I'd prepared five questions. After that look, three of them went out of my head, so I had to start with the most boring one there is.

"Let me ask you the questions they ask at every interview," I said, "and you pretend you're hearing them for the first time. Why Thailand?"

"It is warm here," she said. After a moment she added, "And far."

She wasn't going to explain far from what. You could see it in how she looked me in the eye, ready to bat away the next question. I had no follow-up for that. Ten years ago I'd picked a city on the same principle, and everyone who asked me "why Bangkok" got an answer about the weather.

"Four years as a teller at a bank," I read from the résumé. "Why did you leave?"

"I did not leave. I went away. The bank stayed where it was, you can check."

"What if I call them for a reference?"

"They will tell you that in four years I never had a shortage. And that I am rude."

"Is that true?"

"The shortage part is true."

I laughed, and she gave me a suspicious look, as if the laugh also needed to be counted before she'd accept it.

"Why do you want to work for us?"

"Honestly?"

"Go ahead. Looks like it's honesty day."

"I need a job with a work permit," she said. "And you, judging by the ad, assistants don't stay long. So the position is surely open."

She wasn't wrong, so I couldn't even be offended. There'd been three nameplates in a month. Ploy went out to lunch and never came back, leaving a container of rice in the fridge nobody dared throw away for a week. Hannah sent a four-line email at three in the morning. Joy just didn't show up one day and was never seen again.

None of them lasted more than two weeks, and none of them said why. So I'd decided it was me. I call people in the evenings and wear flip-flops, and people who sign on to work for a serious American boss aren't ready for that.

And this one sat across from me with her phone on my cord and looked at me with green eyes, wide-set and perfectly calm. Like I was the one who'd come to her for a job. She hadn't apologized for the lobby. She hadn't even praised the view, and everybody falls for the view, from investors to couriers. That's exactly why I seat candidates facing the park.

I liked it. And I liked a few other things you're not supposed to think about in interviews, and the longer we talked, the worse I got at not thinking about them.

Her blouse, buttoned almost to the throat, pulled across her chest every time she sat up straight. After the napkin incident I knew exactly what was under it. I was looking her in the eye so hard she probably decided I was trying to hypnotize her.

And then there was the pantyhose. Sheer, nude, in Bangkok, in November, when the forecast promises ninety by lunch. No woman who's lived here even a month would put on pantyhose in this weather without a serious reason. I ran through reasons while she told me about her language school. Each one was more interesting than the last. At some point I made myself go back to the interview.

"Last question," I said. "A practical one."

I unlocked my phone and slid it across the desk. She took it with two fingers, by the very edge.

"Thirty-seven unread. You're my assistant, I'm your boss, and I'm on vacation. You have five minutes."

She looked at the screen, then at me. In her eyes I could clearly read a word she didn't say out loud. Not a very polite word. But she lowered her head and started scrolling.

"Khun Prasert from Laem Chabang," she read. "The container of air conditioners has been sitting in port for the third day, customs wants the original invoice. Where is the original?"

"In the folder you blotted."

She pulled out the top folder, found the invoice, photographed it with my own phone, typed something and sent it before I could open my mouth.

"Your brother," she went on. "Three fish. Just three fish emojis."

"What would you answer?"

She typed one word and showed me the screen: "No." I laughed. She didn't smile, but the corner of her mouth twitched, and I chalked it up as a small win.

"Brad. Golf Saturday, seven a.m." She scrolled further, and her voice went completely flat. "Nok. 'I bought a new swimsuit and you promised to teach me sailor knots. Pick me up Saturday at six?' Three hearts. And a photo." She raised her eyes to me. "I will not read the photo out loud."

Nok is a flight attendant with Thai Airways, and we see each other when her days off line up with mine. Last Sunday they'd lined up. All I had left from that boat trip was a tan line at my collar and this Saturday, which I'd honestly forgotten about. I wasn't about to explain that to a woman I was interviewing. So I leaned back in my chair and tried to look like a man who tees off at seven on Saturday mornings and ties sailor knots in the evenings.

Judging by her face, she was now fully convinced she'd been right about the tourist downstairs.

"You have a dinner Saturday with a client from Chiang Mai," she said. "Here, in the calendar, at eight. Plus golf and knots. Something has to be canceled."

"Cancel whatever you think you should."

She typed longer than the first two times, then turned the phone around to me: "Nok, Saturday is off, I have dinner with a client. Tie your knots without me."

She watched me over the screen and waited. I had a fair idea what she was waiting for. For me to start explaining who Nok was and that it meant nothing, or at least to ask her to soften the "without me." But Nok is a grown woman who expects nothing from me except a boat when our days off match. Justifying my own Saturday to someone I was interviewing would be ridiculous.

Besides, while she was reading out loud about the swimsuit and the knots, I'd been thinking other things. That Zuzanna's nails were short and bare. That she bit her lower lip when she typed.

That in about fifteen minutes I was apparently going to be her boss, and a boss isn't allowed to think about that.

My father slept with his secretaries. My mother pretended every time that she didn't know. I'd spent ten years building my life so I wouldn't be anything like him, and I had no intention of starting with my assistant.

I hit "send" myself. Nok would read it, sulk until Tuesday and forgive me when I asked her to dinner. Except I didn't think I'd be asking her anymore.

"Probation is three months," I said. "The salary is in the email from Pim, you've seen it."

"You file the work permit right away." She set my phone on the desk screen down, exactly parallel to the edge. "Not in three months. In three months I will have no visa. In twenty-one days, if exact."

She had nothing to bargain with, and we both knew it. She could have lied that she had other offers. Everyone does, and I'd have pretended to believe it. Instead she gave me a number of days and waited.

"Oh," I said. "Okay."

She blinked. You could see she'd had a second argument ready, and I felt a little sorry I'd never get to hear it.

I texted Brad, and two minutes later he was in the doorway. Brad always shows up in two minutes, no matter where he is. In twelve years I've never figured out how he does it. In college we roomed together, and he'd walk into exams last and walk out first with the top grade.

Today he wore a light blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a tennis tan to mid-forearm and that usual smile of his. The one he used equally on clients and the tax office.

"Miss Zuzanna," he said, and held out his hand. "Brad, company counsel. Anything to do with paperwork, you come to me now."

"Zuza," she answered. "If you are hiring me."

"We're hiring you," I said.

I explained the visa in two sentences, and Brad didn't even wince.

"Twenty-one days? We'll make it. I've got a guy at Immigration on Chaeng Watthana who owes me."

He took out a business card, flipped it over and wrote a number on the back.

"That's my personal line. Call anytime, even at night."

"She rides tuk-tuks at night," I said. "So she'll call."

The blush I'd already counted as defeated came back. Zuza gave me a look, and Brad laughed for both of us.

Pim took her off to fill out the paperwork. Through the glass I watched them cross the floor past the coffee machine, Zuza clutching the folder to her chest. In her other hand her phone dangled on my cord, which she'd forgotten to give back. She walked fast, in the short steps you take in a tight skirt. Again I thought about the pantyhose, and again I didn't come up with an answer that satisfied me.

Brad dropped into the chair where she'd just been sitting and put his hands behind his head.

"A foreigner, and her visa goes through us," he said, watching her go. "She's not going anywhere now."

He laughed. So did I. Brad tells jokes like he's reading you a contract clause, and after twelve years you stop noticing.

My phone buzzed on the desk. Zuza had left it screen down. I turned it over, thinking it was Nok, who'd gotten to the part about the knots.

"Bro, we need to talk. Not on the phone."

Once Ty proposed to a girl by voice message while she was in the shower on the other side of the wall. He still thinks it was romantic. I dialed his number. My brother hung up, and a second

later another text came in: "Tonight. Your place. Don't bail on me for the yacht like you always do, it's important."

What the fuck had that idiot done now? I wasn't sure Ty even knew the word "important." For him everything was simple and easy. Always.

* * *

Damn.

Chapter 3. Zuza

On Monday I got to the office at ten to eight so I'd be the first one there. In four years at my last job nobody ever beat me in, and I was secretly proud of it. I planned to start my new life the same way.

* * *

When the elevator doors opened on twenty-three, the first thing I saw was my shaggy tourist. He was sitting in his corner office in flip-flops and a gray T-shirt with no slogan, his hair mashed flat on one side like he'd slept right there on the couch. Two 7-Eleven iced americanos sat in front of him. In his hand was a shawarma in foil from the Lebanese place on Sukhumvit Soi 3, the one that stays open until dawn.

At first I figured the second cup was for me and even rehearsed a polite refusal. But he finished the first, shoved it aside and started on the second without lifting his eyes from the laptop. He looked like he'd spent the night in line at the immigration office on Chaeng Watthana, where I'd sat for four hours in May for one stamp.

Between sips he took bites of the shawarma. The door was open, so I'd heard the chewing from the elevator. A drop of garlic sauce landed on his T-shirt, right on his chest. Grant wiped it off with a finger and licked the finger. In the director's office. At eight in the morning.

"Good morning," I said, looking in.

"Oh," he said. "Morning."

That was his fifth "oh." I opened my notebook to the last page, made four little lines and slashed a fifth across them. I couldn't explain to myself why I was counting. I couldn't stop, either.

My desk stood right outside his door, also behind glass. Pim had given me a laptop, a key card and a badge with a name the guard downstairs managed to read out loud on the third try. Then I did what I do at every new job: pulled out all the drawers and checked what I'd inherited.

Not much. A stapler, three pens of which one worked, a packet of soy sauce from some delivery order, and emptiness wiped with a damp napkin until it shone. That was obviously Pim, and obviously not for the first time. Three assistants had gone through this desk in the last month. The girl from accounting told me so at the coffee machine on my first day, in a whisper, with the relish people save for gossip about which executive is getting divorced.

I gave Grant his cord back that same Monday. I coiled it in a figure eight, tied it with a hair elastic and left it on the edge of his desk next to his turtle-shaped pen holder. He nodded without looking up from his call. Tuesday morning the cord was on my keyboard, wrapped around my stapler. Wednesday I returned it again. Thursday I found it plugged into the outlet under my desk, with the end pulled up so I wouldn't have to bend over.

Normally I'd have figured he just didn't want to watch my ass while I crawled under the desk, holding my breath, in a pencil skirt you can only get under a desk in sideways. I, on the other hand, would have enjoyed looking at his.

In June Mali took me to a ladyboy show at Calypso. After that night I knew the best legs and asses in Bangkok belong to girls in five-inch heels, and I shouldn't even try to compete. Grant would probably make the cut at their casting call for backup dancers. I even knew the best angle to watch him from.

On Wednesday in the conference room a marker rolled under the table. Grant went after it, and his faded shorts pulled so tight that I stood in the doorway holding a folder for two whole minutes and couldn't remember why I'd come. He came up with the marker and asked if I was okay. I said I was looking for the minutes. The minutes were in the folder I was pressing to my chest.

In those two minutes I forgave him the Monday shawarma, the sauce on the T-shirt and even the licked finger.

After the cord business I gave in and kept it. Care or a test? I never figured out which, and I didn't ask, because I didn't like either answer.

Grant gave me access to his calendar Monday before lunch, and for the first half hour I just stared at it. Tuesday at two he had three meetings at once. Wednesday said "Prasert???" with no time and three question marks. Every Saturday at seven a.m. repeated "Brad golf," and every weekend until January was filled in with one word in capital letters: YACHT.

Four years at the bank had taught me how to handle a mess like this: sort it into stacks first, then count. Clients went blue, port and customs green, Brad and everything legal yellow. I painted the yacht gray. What goes on there is none of an assistant's business.

That left the meetings that wouldn't go into any stack. Three in two weeks, all identical: a time, the word "Lunch" and nothing else. No place, no name. The organizer was a user called Tyler Reed. The next lunch was Thursday at twelve thirty. I left those meetings without a color and went to Grant.

"Who's Lunch?" I asked, and set the laptop down in front of him on the desk.

Grant leaned toward the screen. I stood at his shoulder and caught the same citrus from the lobby, with the garlic from Monday's shawarma breaking through it. Not a great combo. I didn't move away anyway.

He was the one who moved. He rolled his chair back, like he'd remembered a rule, and for a second his face looked the way it had that morning over the second cup. Which, honestly, freaked me out a little. Until then he'd moved smoothly and loosely, like a sailboat on open water.

A sailboat in flip-flops and tight shorts. Okay. The heat was officially getting to me.

"Oh," he said. "That's Ty."

Six. I made the mark in my head. The notebook was back on my desk.

"Your brother puts meetings on your calendar," I said. "No names, no address. Two have already happened, and you apparently didn't go to either."

"He's had access ever since his two months working here. Business development." Grant thought about it. "Mostly he developed the coffee machine."

"So he left and took the key to the vault with him."

"Is that how they say it at the bank?"

"At the bank they change the locks the same day. Who is your lunch with on Thursday?"

"No idea. Maybe a girl he wants me to meet. Maybe a guy who sells fish wholesale."

"Then I will delete it."

"Don't." He smiled the same smile he'd used in the lobby to turn his brother down about the fish. "If I delete it, Ty will be hurt and call me for a week. If I leave it, he might show up Thursday on his own and tell me who he invited. Let it sit."

A reasonable explanation. Just too detailed for "let it sit."

I went back to my desk. Through the glass I watched him pick up his phone, stare at the screen for a while and put it down without pressing anything. A minute later he did it again. I'd known a man who looked at his phone and pressed nothing, and it hadn't ended well. Only that one hid the screen from me. This one seemed to have forgotten his walls were glass.

Brad showed up Tuesday after lunch, two minutes after I emailed to say the document copies were ready. He sat on the edge of my desk, gave me the smile he kept for clients and the tax office, and said his guy at immigration needed the original passport. For one night.

I didn't hand it over right away. For four years I'd taken people's documents through the teller tray and never let a stranger's passport out of arm's reach. Now I was being asked to give up my own to a man I'd seen twice in my life and go home without it. I took a sheet of Reed Logistics letterhead, wrote a receipt with the passport number and today's date and turned it around to face Brad.

"Twelve years of practice," he said, signing, "and this is the first time anyone's given me a receipt. Can I photograph it for my mom later?"

"You can, once you return the passport."

He laughed and left with my passport in the breast pocket of his light blue shirt. All evening at Auntie Noi's I kept touching my bag where the passport usually lived.

Wednesday at nine it was lying on my keyboard in an envelope, with the filing receipt and a sticky note: "Filed. Guy is happy. B." Just in case, I counted the pages. Only then did I breathe out. That morning, for the first time since May, I didn't count how many days were left on my visa. Until eleven I walked around the office grinning like an idiot, until the girl from accounting asked if I'd won the lottery.

At eleven I was carrying signed invoices to Pim and nearly collided with two men in suits by the reception desk. They weren't in the calendar under any color. I knew that for sure, because the calendar was mine now.

Dark suits, ties, polished shoes, in eighty-five-degree heat, when even Brad goes around with his sleeves rolled up. The older one, with gray at his temples, walked up to the desk. The younger one stood behind him holding a paper bag with handles, like you'd hold somebody else's umbrella. I stopped by a column with my invoices and watched the older man put his palms together and bow to Pim. Pim bowed back lower than she ever bowed to couriers.

They asked for Mr. Tyler. Pim said he wasn't in. The older man nodded without any surprise, and the younger one set the bag on the counter.

"For Mr. Tyler," the older one said in English, softly and very clearly. "And for the office. We will come again."

He didn't leave a name. I waited until the elevator doors closed behind them, set the invoices on Pim's counter and asked who that was and where I should log it.

"They did not give a name," Pim said.

In the bag were mangoes, big and yellow, each in its own foam net sleeve, about ten of them. Mangoes aren't in season in November. For ones like that the Gourmet Market at Emporium would charge eight hundred baht, maybe a thousand, by my estimate. Pim took the bag by the very tips of the handles, carried it into the kitchen and set it down at the far end of the counter, behind the microwave. Then she went back to her desk and didn't look toward the kitchen again.

I told Grant right away, since there was nowhere else to log it.

"Oh," he said. Twenty-three "oh"s. "What did they say?"

"That they'll come again."

He got up, went out to the kitchen, stood over the bag with his arms crossed and came back to his office without touching anything.

I went to look too. Just mangoes, yellow, without a single spot, and they smelled so good my jaw ached. I ran through everything I'd learned from Mali in six months. Don't touch someone's head (though the girls on Soi Cowboy don't seem to mind, once you've bought them a cocktail). Don't point at anything with your foot. Don't step on a dropped coin, because it has the king on it. Nothing about mangoes. But six months isn't long.

I took a photo of the bag right there in the kitchen and sent it to Mali, asking if Thais have a superstition about not eating mangoes somebody gave you.

Mali answered in a minute. Her café was in the lull before lunch. "Kitten, mango everybody eat. If you not eat, give me kaaa." Three emojis with tongues sticking out, and right after: "Now show tourist."

I wasn't planning to. But when I got back to my desk, Grant was sitting behind his glass with one leg over the other, the flip-flop hanging off his big toe again, and I knew Mali wouldn't let up. I pretended to read my email and took a picture of him over my laptop. It came out blurry: glass, a glare from the window and a man in flip-flops looking at his phone.

"Kitten," Mali wrote. "This also everybody eat. If you not eat, give me kaaa."

I answered that I don't eat at work and put my phone face down, exactly parallel to the edge of the desk.

Until evening I waited for the men in suits to come back. Instead, the next day, Thursday at eleven, Tyler showed up, and the whole floor heard him before it saw him.

He carried two boxes of Krispy Kreme donuts and greeted everyone by name on his way from the elevator. He asked Pim about her mom's knee, called accounting "my queens" and shoved a pink-frosted donut at the courier waiting for a signature before the guy could say no.

He was shorter than his brother and narrower in the shoulders, with lighter, curlier hair and the same gray eyes, minus the lines in the corners. He must have been laughing a few years less. His smile was the kind you immediately want to lend money to. I'd met people like that. Somebody else usually ended up paying.

He set the boxes right on my desk.

"Ah!" he said. "It's her. The one who said no to my fish."

So the brother was an "Ah." Thank God he wasn't an "Oh" too. I couldn't have afforded a second notebook of tally marks.

"I said no on behalf of your brother," I said. "Personally I am neutral about the fish."

"So the fish have a chance." He opened a box and pushed it toward me. "Take one before accounting stampedes."

I took a chocolate one, because refusing donuts in your first week is rude, and before he could leave I turned my laptop around to face him.

"Today at twelve thirty Grant has lunch," I said. "You put it in. I need to know with whom and where, so I can book a table."

"Oh, no booking. It's kind of an, uh, casual lunch."

"Your brother didn't go to the first two," I said. "Maybe he doesn't like the menu?"

"I like you," Ty said. "Grant always hires people who don't like me. Hm… You think I should switch it to something Mediterranean? What's your name, by the way?"

"Zuzanna."

"Zuza," he shortened it right away, though nobody had given him permission. "So what do you think about the cuisine, Zuza?"

"I think the cuisine is chosen by whoever is paying. Who is the lunch with, Ty?"

"Good people. They've wanted to meet my brother for ages, and my brother never has time for good people."

"Do the good people have names? I need to write something instead of 'Lunch.'"

"Write 'surprise.'" He was still smiling, but he was looking past me now, at the glass wall of the office, where Grant was on the phone and hadn't seen us yet.

"Yesterday your good people came by themselves," I said. "Two of them, in suits. They left no names, but they did leave you mangoes."

His smile stayed where it was, only now it sat apart from the rest of his face. I'd seen that on customers when the card machine said "insufficient funds." The face holds while the fingers are already digging through the wallet for another card. Ty looked toward the kitchen, then at his watch, which, I'd swear, had nothing interesting on it.

"Crap," he said. "I left my car on Sukhumvit under a sign where the tow truck gets there faster than a taxi. Donuts for everybody! Pi Pim, say hi to your mom's knee!"

Grant had just hung up and was getting out of his chair. By the time he opened his office door, the elevator doors had already closed. He stood in the doorway, looking at the elevator, and for the first time all week I couldn't find anything touristy in his face.

At twelve thirty he didn't go anywhere. Pim brought him a box of chicken and rice, and he ate it at his desk without looking up from his laptop.

The donuts in the kitchen were gone in seven minutes. I timed it. Nobody touched the bag of mangoes behind the microwave, though the entire floor walked past it. The girl from accounting, who'd eaten two donuts that morning, steered around it like you steer around somebody else's change on the floor.

At three Grant had negotiations with a Hong Kong shipping company, marked blue, and he asked me to take the minutes. Three men from Hong Kong, all in suits, plus a lawyer in a suit that looked even more expensive. Grant walked into the conference room in the same gray T-shirt and flip-flops, sat at the head of the table and crossed one leg over the other. I watched the lawyer look at the flip-flop dangling off his big toe and relax.

Here, apparently, a hundred-thousand-baht suit said snob, and an American in tight shorts and dirty flip-flops said let's do business.

The contract was forty-two pages. I'd printed it myself, and it was still warm in my hands when I carried it from the printer. Grant leafed through it while the Hong Kong team told him how much they loved Bangkok. I figured he was just looking for the signature page.

"Oh," he said, very friendly.

Then he started in on clause fourteen, under which Reed Logistics is liable for the cargo from the minute the container comes off the ship in Hong Kong, even though their own terminal unloads and stores it there. Then clause twenty-two, where force majeure somehow didn't include floods. In Thailand. Where the rainy season comes every year.

He talked calmly, with a little laugh, like he was telling a joke about his own brother, and with every sentence the lawyer sat up straighter. Ten minutes later the lawyer promised to send a new draft by Monday. The Hong Kong team was laughing at Grant's jokes, and not out of politeness anymore.

I wrote it all into the minutes, furious. Before every clause he caught them on, Grant said his "oh." Now I knew what it was for: while he drew out that "oh," he was reading the fine print.

In the lobby I'd explained tuk-tuk prices to a man in flip-flops who was sharp enough that lawyers had spent a week trying to hide two clauses from him and failed. A week ago I'd wanted him to read my credit card agreement out loud. Now I knew he'd also find the clause where I was getting ripped off. What to do with him now, I had no idea, and that made me even angrier.

Meanwhile I was looking at his hands. He underlined lines in the margins with a pencil, small and even, and the sun-bleached hairs on his wrist glowed. He probably did everything he took on just as calmly and unhurriedly, I thought. Right then I wrote the word "wrist" into the minutes and spent a long time crossing it out so nobody could read it.

By Thursday evening there were thirty-nine tally marks in the notebook.

On Friday after lunch the kitchen smelled so strongly of mango that it carried to my desk. The bag had been behind the microwave for three days. The mangoes had ripened and started to darken on the sides, and another day or two and they'd have to be thrown out.

My grandmother used to send me away from the table for leaving food on my plate, and where I grew up you didn't throw food away. Especially this kind. The bag, after all, had been left "for the office," and I was the office now too. I picked the ripest one, took a knife and a plate from the kitchen and cut it at my desk the way Mali had taught me my first week: two halves along the pit, score a crosshatch through the flesh and flip it inside out.

Pim came over when I was finishing the first half. She was carrying a cardboard box that had held printer paper and a new nameplate with my name, ZUZANNA, white letters on black.

"The stationery is yours now," Pim said, and set the box on the far side of the desk from my plate. "These are the old nameplates. Khun Grant does not allow throwing them away."

She looked at the mango on my plate, then at me, and said nothing. Pim didn't say much anyway, but this time, I think, she kept quiet on purpose. Why Grant kept the nameplates of the assistants who'd run, I didn't ask. Everybody in that office seemed to have a notebook with tally marks of their own.

In the box lay three nameplates, each in its own clear sleeve: PLOY, HANNAH, JOY. I set mine on top to try it out. I didn't like how it looked there. I pulled it back out, snagged Hannah's sleeve on the way, and a yellow sticky note folded in half fell out onto the desk.

The handwriting was round, pressed hard into the paper, in English. Six words and one letter.

"Don't take the mangoes from them. H."

The mango in my mouth was sweet and ripe, the best in six months. I sat over the sticky note, not knowing whether to swallow or spit it into a napkin folded in quarters.

Chapter 4. Grant

Ty lasted at her desk less than a minute. I was finishing up with Prasert about the container, and through the glass I watched my brother set a stack of donut boxes in front of her. Zuza didn't let him finish. She swung her laptop around to face him. On Monday she'd turned her calendar toward me the exact same way and asked who the hell Lunch was.

She'd been standing at my shoulder then, leaning toward the screen, and her hair, heavy and black, swung against my cheek. She smelled like the same plain soap as at the interview. I stopped hearing a word about the calendar and just breathed in that soap. Then I rolled my chair back, before I could come up with a decent excuse.

Zuza looked at me as if I'd dropped a wad of cash in front of her and not bothered to pick it up. Finally I told her that Lunch was Ty.

Now Ty was standing at her desk, wearing the wide smile he only uses when he's lying. He glanced at the kitchen, then at his watch, yelled something about a tow truck and was in the elevator before I'd even gotten my office door open.

Since Wednesday there'd been a bag of mangoes on the kitchen counter behind the microwave. Two men in dark suits had dropped it off, asked for Mr. Tyler, said they'd be back, and left no name. When I asked Pim who they were, she said they hadn't given one, and she looked away. In ten years I'd never seen Pim look away. Not even at the tax auditors.

At three we had the Hong Kong people, and Zuza took minutes for the full hour. I caught their lawyer on clause fourteen and again on twenty-two. Out of the corner of my eye I kept seeing her cross something out in her notes, slowly and with great care. I was dying to know what.

I let the Hong Kong guys go at four-thirty, and at six I went down and grabbed a motorbike taxi outside the building. On a Thursday night the drive to Ekkamai takes until Friday. The driver in the orange vest said a hundred baht. I said, "Eighty." He looked at my flip-flops, then at me, shrugged and handed me a helmet. For the first block I thought Zuza would've been proud of me.

After that I thought about Ty. A week ago he'd shown up at my place at nine, eaten my leftover pad thai straight out of the container, and spent two hours telling me which fish live the longest if you pick the right gravel. He never once put the fork down. Twice I asked what he'd come to talk about, and both times he said, "In a sec, bro," and went back to cichlids. He never said why he'd come, and he never once explained what a cichlid was. Damn it, Ty.

At midnight he hugged me in the doorway, said, "Okay, bro, next time," and left. I sat on my balcony until three in the morning, running through everything he could have gotten himself into. If you push Ty, he'll talk about fish for another two hours. I've known that since we were kids. So I decided to give him a couple of days to come to me on his own. All week I picked up my phone to call him and put it back down.

Today he'd run from my assistant, and I was done waiting for him to come around.

Mom had bought him the condo in Ekkamai the first time he dropped out of college, and not much had changed since, except for the aquarium. It was about fifty gallons and took up half the living room wall. It had one fish in it, orange and fat, with a sulky mouth. Ty called it the pilot project.

He opened the door himself, with a half-packed gym bag in his hand.

"Oh! Bro," he said. "I was just about to…"

"Where?"

"Pattaya. Clear my head for a couple of days."

"From the guys in suits?"

He laughed, but he put the bag down, and I knew we were finally going to have this conversation. Ty has always lied well, as long as his hands are busy. Once they're free, he starts rubbing them like he's cold, and the lying stops working. That's how I knew who broke Mom's vase when we were kids.

He sat on the arm of the couch and stared at the fish.

"The bar closed in May," he said.

The last time I'd been there was April. Ty had poured me something blue with an umbrella in it and told me business was "on fire." I'd pretended not to notice that on a Friday night he had four people at the bar. All of them friends.

"Rent, suppliers, the tax people." He counted on his fingers and lost track at four. "I owed money to all of Thonglor, Grant. I was ashamed to come to you with another check. You'd have signed it again, and you'd have looked at me again, like you're looking at me right now."

"I'm not looking at you any way yet."

"You are." He rubbed his palms. "Some investors offered to cover my debts."

"What's the collateral?"

"I didn't have any. No money, no bar." He wouldn't take his eyes off the fish. "I gave them a guarantee."

"What guarantee?"

"Bro, it's a formality. They said so themselves."

He didn't say another word about the guarantee, no matter how many times I asked. Ty looked at the fish and the fish looked at him, and for the first time in my life I envied a fish. At least there was glass between it and my brother.

"How much did you take?"

"Six million."

I did the conversion in my head. About a hundred seventy thousand dollars. Bad money. Not end-of-the-world money. I was almost relieved.

"I'll pay it back. Tomorrow."

"I offered." For the first time all night, Ty looked straight at me. "I told them my brother would pay it all back, with interest. They wouldn't even listen. They don't want money, Grant. They want a partner with a license and a port. One container, maybe two."

I got up and started pacing, but Ty's floor was covered with aquarium magazines. On the second lap I tripped over *Malawi Cichlids*, some neon fish on the cover.

"What's in the containers?"

"I didn't ask."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to know." His hands wouldn't stay still now. "And you don't want to either."

"Who are they?"

"They'll come and tell you themselves. Just go to lunch with them, once. I put it in your calendar three times, and you never showed up. They're very polite people, you'll see."

"I noticed. They wear ties in ninety degrees and give out mangoes in November."

"See?" my brother said hopefully.

If I said yes, any container that left the port under my company's name would be my container, whatever was inside it. For a US citizen, that smells like federal prison.

"No," I said.

Ty flinched, though I'd said it more quietly than the "no" about the fish in the lobby.

"Just don't tell them 'no' the way you told me," he said. "You can't say it to them like that."

He zipped up the bag. I wanted to grab the little shit by the collar and shake him, and then hug him, like I used to when our parents were fighting downstairs and I'd take Ty to my room and turn the cartoons up loud.

In the elevator it hit me that in that whole conversation he hadn't given me a single name. And he hadn't asked me for money. Not once. That hadn't happened since he learned to say "bro."

* * *

On Friday I sat on the balcony again half the night, and by morning I could barely think. Prasert sent his report on the container of air conditioners, and I stared past the monitor, through the glass, at my assistant.

All week she'd been scribbling on the last page of her notebook. Little tally marks, a line across every fifth one, like we count crates at the warehouse. That morning I decided to test it. Twice I silently put papers on her desk, and the tally didn't grow. Then I asked whether Prasert had called, and she added one. So she was counting something I said. I can get through a forty-page contract in ten minutes, and for a week I hadn't been able to figure out what she was counting.

After lunch I looked up from the report again and saw Zuza eating a mango.

She sat behind her glass with a plate and a knife from our kitchen, and she'd cut it into a hedgehog, the way Thais do. I half stood up. Then I sat back down, because I had no idea what I'd say to her. "Don't eat the mango, it came from people my brother owes six million"? By evening Pim would be ordering a new nameplate.

Three assistants had walked out on me in a month, and that whole time I'd blamed myself and my flip-flops. Watching Zuza eat that mango, I wondered for the first time who else had been coming through the office while I wasn't there.

Juice ran from her fingers down to her wrist, over pale skin with a blue vein showing through it. Zuza licked it off with the tip of her tongue, briskly, like sealing an envelope, without looking up from her plate. Her lips were shiny with mango, and she licked those too.

I turned back to my monitor. What would that juice taste like if I licked it off her wrist myself? And then farther up, from her wrist to her elbow? My shorts were suddenly a problem. I read Prasert's report three times and still couldn't tell you what was going on with the air conditioners.

Then Pim came over to her with the box where I kept the old nameplates. Every time, Pim asked if she could throw them out, and every time I said, "Let them sit."

My father's secretaries turned over once a year. The morning after one disappeared, a new nameplate would be sitting on her desk, and the old one would be in the trash by the elevator. When I was nine, I fished "Miss Carol" out of there and hid it under my bed. Miss Carol gave me mints and was the only person in that office who called me by my name. I've never thrown out anyone else's nameplate since, even though not one of my three assistants had time to give me so much as a mint.

Ten years later I figured out that Miss Carol gave my father something sweeter than mints. Judging by the rattle of coffee cups behind his office door, she did it right on his desk.

Zuza set her nameplate, the new one, on top of the box, then took it right back, and I was happier about that than a boss ought to be.

At six I texted Brad, and two minutes later he was in my doorway with two bottles of Singha from our fridge. He dropped into the chair where I seat candidates, hooked one foot up on the corner of my desk and opened both bottles with a lighter.

I told him everything, from the closed bar and the six million to the bag behind the microwave. Brad listened without interrupting. He only asked what the guarantee was that Ty had given them. When I said my brother never admitted it, he was quiet for a while, then asked what the two guys looked like and whether they'd left a card.

"Pim said they didn't give a name."

Brad grunted and studied the label on his bottle for a while.

"Give me a week," he finally said. "I'll ask my guy at the port who these two are and find out what else they've got going. And meanwhile, don't go to any lunches, and don't say a word to your assistant. She's been here five days. She'll get scared and run, like the other three, and then I have to file visa paperwork for a new one."

While he was talking about visas, Zuza was getting ready to go home behind the glass. She closed CargoWise on the office computer and shut it down, then her laptop. She put the pens in their cup, dropped the notebook in her bag, and started hunting under the desk for her pumps, which I'd noticed she'd kicked off right after lunch. One shoe she found by feel without looking. The other had gone farther.

So Zuza stretched out her leg in its nude pantyhose, hooked the shoe with her toes and dragged it toward her, slowly, with total concentration, with the same look she'd had while working through my calendar. I forgot what he'd asked me and answered at random:

"I don't need a big scene, Brad."

"Then there won't be one."

He clinked his bottle against mine, and for the rest of the beer he told me about the new boat he'd been saving up for three years. Zuza waved to Pim and took the elevator down.

* * *

On Monday Zuza stuck her head in at two minutes to ten, wallet in hand, and asked if I wanted an americano, since she was going to the 7-Eleven anyway.

"Oh," I said. "Yes, thanks."

She jotted something in the notebook she carried under her arm and left without waiting for the money. It was the first time in a week she'd done something for me that I hadn't asked for. I watched through the glass as she walked to the elevator.

In ten years in Bangkok, I'd never once had to go looking for something nice to look at. In this city people look at you on their own, from flight attendants like Nok to the kathoeys on Nana Plaza with lashes you could sweep the floor with, and none of them ever ask what you do for a living. I'd gotten used to the attention like you get used to the heat. I'd stopped noticing it a long time ago.

I looked at Zuza differently. Her pencil skirt only let her take short steps, and with every step the fabric pulled tight across one hip, then the other. Above that the skirt hugged her ass, and that's where I looked until she reached the elevator.

She'd been wearing pantyhose for a second week now, nude and sheer, in eighty-six degrees. I'd have told any other woman in this city that it was insane. On her they shimmered under the office lights, and I wanted to run my hand up them from her knee. What exactly I wanted to check up there, I never settled with myself. Her pumps were black, low-heeled, the kind you buy for job interviews and funerals. Nothing sexy about them. I still pictured her in nothing but those pumps.

Then I reminded myself I was her boss and stared at my monitor, but not for long. At the elevator, Zuza shifted from foot to foot and tugged her skirt down. The doors closed behind her, and almost right away, at exactly ten, the doors next to them opened.

A short, elderly Thai man in a light gray suit, tailored to fit him perfectly, stepped out. His gray hair was combed smoothly back, and he wore round glasses with thin frames. A young man in a dark suit followed him, probably the one who'd held the bag on Wednesday, and stayed by the elevator with his hands folded in front of him.

Pim got up from behind the reception desk, pressed her palms together at her face and bowed lower than she bows to clients. The old man answered with a short nod, the kind elders give to the young.

He didn't stop at reception. First he went into the kitchen, looked behind the microwave and stood over the bag of mangoes, his head tilted slightly. Then he came back out, pulled out my assistant's chair, sat down, put his hands on his knees and waited.

I didn't recognize him. I stayed behind the glass and watched what he'd do next, because that's how I'd learned to do it at negotiations: never go out first, let the man show you why he came. The old man did nothing. He looked at the nameplate that said ZUZANNA and, I think, smiled at it.

Zuza came back six minutes later with two cups. She saw a stranger in her chair and stopped mid-step, and I knew I couldn't keep sitting there. I opened my office door just in time to hear the start.

"Good morning," she said in English. "You are sitting on my place."

"I am waiting for Mr. Reed," the old man answered, softly and very clearly.

"For Mr. Reed it is more comfortable to wait over there."

She pointed at the sofa by reception, not with a finger but with an open hand, palm up, like Thais do. They'd been teaching her well, these six months.

"If you have appointment, I will take you immediately. Do you have appointment?"

"No."

"Then I will make you one." She set both cups on the edge of the desk, took her laptop right out from under him and opened it on her bent arm, the way a waitress opens her order pad. "Your name?"

"Somchai. Somchai Charoensuk."

She typed the last name without blinking, and to me that name was familiar. About seven years ago it had been in the *Bangkok Post*. A warehouse at the Khlong Toei port burned down along with the customs paperwork, two witnesses changed their testimony, and the case was closed for lack of evidence.

There'd been a photograph, too. A short man in a light suit walked out of the courthouse, smiling at the photographer the same way he'd just been smiling at my assistant. A month later, one of those two witnesses was pulled out of the canal at Khlong Toei. The paper never wrote about the other one again.

My hands were sweating. I stood behind the glass in my flip-flops, and ten feet away a man who left witnesses in canals was looking at my assistant's nameplate. Jesus fucking Christ.

"Purpose of the meeting?" Zuza asked.

"Mangoes," Somchai said.

She typed that in too and closed the laptop.

"Please, move. I must work, and on the sofa will be more comfortable for you."

Khun Somchai looked at her over his glasses. His eyebrows crept up, and for a second he had the face of a man who hadn't been told "move" in thirty years. The young man by the elevator took a step toward us, but without turning around, Somchai lifted two fingers off his knee, and the young man went back to his place. I stopped breathing.

Then the old man laughed softly, briefly, as if a granddaughter had scolded him at dinner. He rose, buttoned his jacket on one button and walked to the sofa.

A man his age, in that suit, had moved because a young farang girl told him to. And the interest in his eyes was what I liked least. Halfway there he saw me in the doorway and smiled wider.

"Mr. Reed. Forgive me for coming without an appointment. Your assistant has already made me one." He glanced back at Zuza. "I like her."

I took him into my office. There he turned the chair with its back to the window and its face to the door, and only then sat down. He didn't even look at the view, the one that has always worked in my favor in negotiations.

He spoke unhurriedly, in better English than half my clients, and he took the long way around. His granddaughter was studying in Boston and complained about the snow. The mangoes this year were from Chachoengsao, from his cousin's orchard, a late variety you can't find in the stores.

"Someone in your office has tried them," he said. "Good. Then we are welcome here."

"Your brother is a very nice young man, Mr. Reed," Somchai went on. "He has a beautiful fish. Orange, in a big aquarium. My people visited him at home, and they enjoyed it." He paused, giving me time to hear that. "A little hasty, the young man. He left us something as a guarantee. I do not like such papers, Mr. Reed. They make people nervous. I know how business is done in my country, and

I have no objection to bending a few rules for the sake of jobs and a respectable sum for the economy and the taxes. But in our line of work, we cannot do without guarantees. Please understand me."

I didn't know what papers he was talking about. Ty had said they didn't want money, but Ty had never in his life bargained his way out of anything. I decided to find out if Somchai had a price.

"I'll pay double for my brother," I said. "Twelve million. Tomorrow."

"Your brother said you would offer money." Somchai nodded, the way you nod at a child who has solved a problem correctly, just not the one on the test. "We do not need money. We need a small favor. Logistics is your craft, Mr. Reed, not ours. One container through your port, under your papers. I will explain the details over lunch, if you allow me to invite you. Your assistant, I think, will find the time in your calendar."

I looked through the glass at Zuza. She was back at her desk, my americano on the edge of it, typing with her lower lip caught in her teeth. Since last week she'd been preparing our customs declarations, and as of today she signed them too. Brad had suggested the power of attorney for signing when he filed her work permit. "An assistant without signing authority at customs is no use to anyone," he'd said.

I remembered how at the interview she'd sent Prasert the invoice in under a minute, and I'd signed. If Somchai's container went through the port, the first person customs would come after was the girl whose visa our company sponsored. Brad had joked back then that this one wasn't going anywhere. Now I didn't like his joke at all.

I looked away from the glass and ran into Somchai's eyes. He was looking at the same spot I'd just been looking at, and he was smiling.

"The immigration police have been very attentive to foreigners lately," he said, in the same voice he'd used to tell me about his granddaughter. "It would be a pity if they began asking your employees unnecessary questions. Especially such well-brought-up and literate ones." He took off his glasses, wiped them with a little handkerchief and put them back on. "And in Khlong Toei, Mr. Reed, the warehouses sometimes burn. All by themselves. The heat."

There wasn't a drop of malice in his voice, and that made it the scariest thing I'd ever heard. He talked about Zuza with the same warmth he'd used for the late variety of mango from his cousin's orchard. I wanted to stand up and put myself between him and the glass.

I could have said "no" like I'd said it to Ty in the lobby, loud, across the whole floor, so Somchai would hear it all the way down in the lobby. But I could hear my brother in my head, "you can't say it to them like that." For the first time in ten years in Bangkok, I picked my words like my father picked his when he talked to people he was afraid of.

"I'm afraid a partnership doesn't interest me, Khun Somchai," I said. "But thank you for the mangoes."

My voice came out level and polite. I disgusted myself.

"I understand," Somchai nodded.

He took a sheet of paper folded in half out of his inside pocket and laid it on the edge of my desk without unfolding it.

"We do not like big scenes either, Mr. Reed. Think it over. I am in no hurry."

He looked at his watch, thin and gold, and rose. It was half past ten, to the minute.

"Half an hour," he said. "I do not like to take more of people's time."

I walked him to the elevator. At Zuza's desk he stopped. She looked up from her laptop, and Somchai pressed his palms together in front of her and bowed slightly. Zuza bowed back, confused, without getting up.

At the elevator he turned to me. The young man was already holding the doors.

"A good assistant," Khun Somchai said. "Take care of her."

The elevator doors closed. Only then did I notice my T-shirt was stuck to my back. I went back to my office and unfolded the sheet. I recognized it at once: a copy of the agreement from my safe,

in Thai and English, and at the bottom two signatures, mine and Pim's. The sheet shook in my hand. I sat down, though I hadn't planned to.

Under Thai law a farang can't own a majority of his own logistics company. So on paper most of Reed Logistics belongs to Pim, whom Brad's people found for me ten years ago, and this document says it all really belongs to me. Half the farang companies in Bangkok are set up that way, and everybody keeps quiet until a paper like that lands at the Ministry of Commerce. Then the company is shut down in a day, the farang is deported, and people like Pim go to prison.

I'd given Ty the safe code myself three years ago, when he worked for me for two months. I never changed it.

Twelve million I could hand over tomorrow. But nobody was going to give me that copy back, and I didn't want to think about how many times it had been photocopied. We were fucked.

Through the glass I could see Pim at the reception desk. She sat very straight and didn't look my way. For ten years she'd come to the office before me and left after. If this paper got to the right place, they'd just put me on a plane. But they would put her in prison for real.

Chapter 5. Zuza

On Saturdays Mali serves khao niao mamuang, sticky rice with mango and coconut cream, and she announces it in chalk on the board by the door, in big letters with three hearts. I spotted the board from the corner and seriously thought about turning around. After Friday's sticky note I couldn't look at a mango. The one I'd managed to eat had been the best in six months, which was exactly why I was so mad.

Mali's café is small, on the ground floor of an old shophouse on one of the sois in Ari, with six tables and one cat bed by the register. Mali lives upstairs and comes down at opening in bear-print pajamas with an apron over them. She comes up to my shoulder and keeps her hair short and dyed caramel. At twenty-seven she got braces. A Thai girl without a perfect smile can't get married, she says, and Mali hasn't decided about marriage yet, but she wants to keep the option.

Biscuit was lying on the register in a green polka-dot necktie, giving me the look cats give you when they've been dressed without their consent. I scratched him behind the ear in solidarity.

"Kitten!" Mali shot out from behind the counter and hugged me so hard I dropped my bag. "You came! I think tourist steal you for weekend, kaaa."

"Nobody stole me."

"Too bad." She let go, stepped back and looked me over from the bottom up. "Pantyhose. On Saturday. Kitten, bruise already yellow, only me and God can see. Take off."

I kept the pantyhose on and sat by the window. Mali set down a bright orange Thai milk tea and a plate of rice and mango at once. The mango was fanned out, every slice glistening. I pushed the plate away before I'd thought about it. Mali noticed.

"What, you on diet too, like girls from my gym?"

"There has been a bag of mangoes in our office since Wednesday, and nobody eats them. Except me."

"Why?"

Instead of answering, I pulled Hannah's yellow sticky note out of my bag, smoothed it flat on the table and slid it over. Mali read it out loud in English, in a singsong, and burst out laughing.

"'Don't take the mangoes from them.' Kitten, this better than any drama. Last girl wrote this? She was jealous of tourist?"

"She worked there two weeks and ran."

"So she fell for tourist and he not look at her. I run too, kaaa."

She sat down next to me instead of across and pressed against my side, the way she does when she's about to pry something out of me. Chin on my shoulder. Thai girls touch their friends like people back home touch only relatives, and only on holidays. In May it scared me. By November I was used to it. I even missed it when Mali was busy for a week and nobody hung off my shoulder.

"Show him again," she said into my ear.

"Who?"

"Don't pretend. Tourist."

She pulled the phone out of my bag herself, opened the gallery and found that blurry shot through the glass. Two fingers, pinch-zoom, until nothing was left on the screen but shorts.

"Ooo," Mali drawled. "Kitten. You see how they sit on him?"

"I work there. I see."

"You see and you quiet. This crime against friend." She zoomed in more, and the shorts dissolved into pixels. "Okay. You check already what he have under, or I go to interview at your office myself, kaaa?"

"Mali!"

"What, 'Mali'? I ask as friend. You not check, in one month some flight attendant check."

At the words "flight attendant" I remembered Nok's text about the swimsuit and turned red. Mali saw my cheeks, squealed, tossed the phone on the table and wrapped both arms around me.

"Ooo, kitten. Already is flight attendant?" She kissed my temple. "Never mind. Flight attendants fly away, assistants sit next to him every day."

I laughed and told her about the negotiations, how he underlined the clauses in pencil, small and even, while the lawyer in the expensive suit sat up straighter and straighter. The word "wrist," which I'd later spent a whole minute crossing out of the minutes, I kept to myself. Mali listened with her cheek in her hand and said "ooo" after every clause of the contract.

Then I told her about the brother who showed up with two boxes of donuts, called accounting "my queens" and ran away from me after forty seconds. Mali perked up more than she had for the shorts.

"Brother also handsome?"

"Curly, and shorter than Grant. He shoved a donut at the courier, and I think the courier is still in love with him."

"Ooo." Mali thought about it. "I like curly farang. They like babies, only with biiig… um… bulge in pants. Good filling for my donuts, kaaa."

I covered my face with my hand.

"What? You know sex is need for health? You, when last time you have orgasm?"

"Maliii…"

"Why you keep saying Mali, Mali. When?"

"I do not remember!"

"Seeee. You want I help?"

"Mali!"

"Okay, okay. As you like. But if need, we close Biscuit's eyes."

She ran her hand over my thigh, over the pantyhose, slowly, from the knee up.

I knew she was teasing. I also knew that if I said yes right now, I'd most likely have an orgasm before lunch. The thought made me a little wet, and I got mad at myself. Mali was a little brat and also a total knockout, and her fingers made me shiver. Thai women are wired differently from us. They're easygoing about sex, and they also get jealous and hold on to what's theirs so tight you can't pry it loose. In six months I hadn't figured out where possessiveness ends and sex for health begins.

"Houston to Zuza," Mali whispered in my ear and kissed my cheek. "Let me make you coffee, you staring at one point."

While she fussed with the espresso machine, I told her about the men in suits, and for the first time all morning Mali went quiet.

She was carrying the cup over when her hand froze halfway. I told her how the older one with gray at his temples put his palms together for Pim, and Pim bowed to him lower than she bows to couriers, and how they set the bag behind the microwave like it might bite.

"What they look like?" Mali asked.

"Suits, ties. The older one spoke very clean English. They left no name."

Mali put the cup in front of me, sat down next to me and smoothed her apron over her knees. For a second she looked grown-up, nothing like a girl in bear pajamas. I'd never seen her like that in six months.

"In November, mango give only very old people or very rich. Usually both," she said. "You not eat anything from them more, kitten, okay? Eat here."

All that time she'd been stroking my thigh, but now she wasn't teasing. She did it like you rub a child's back after a nightmare. Suddenly I was more scared than when she'd been joking.

She pushed the plate of rice back to me. The mango, she said, came from Makro, frozen, honest, no people in suits involved, and I ate every last grain of rice. A minute later Mali was draped

over my shoulder again, asking whether the tourist wears underwear under his shorts, and if he does, what kind. I never did decide whether I'd imagined her face.

* * *

On Monday I offered Grant coffee myself. Why, I couldn't explain. I blamed Saturday. Mali had talked about shorts for two straight hours, and some of it must have stuck, even though I'd washed my pantyhose twice since. Or maybe it was Friday. On Friday evening, while Brad was drinking beer in his office, Grant looked like he hadn't slept since Thursday.

I know from experience that when you're not sleeping, it sometimes helps if somebody brings you coffee without being asked.

In May Auntie Noi had brought me tea like that. On the day my wedding was supposed to happen, I cried into a pillow at her guesthouse, and Auntie Noi set a cup on the nightstand and left without asking anything.

When I came back from 7-Eleven with two cups, an elderly Thai man in a light gray suit was sitting in my chair, smiling at my nameplate. I moved him. I wrote down his name, Somchai Charoensuk, and the purpose of his visit, which he supplied himself: "mango." He relocated to the couch so obediently I didn't even have time to feel glad. Mali had taught me that the younger person bows first and the older one just answers.

This old man, on his way out, stopped at my desk and put his palms together to me first. I was so thrown that I wai'd back while sitting, which is rude, and I knew that from Mali too. Then I looked at Pim. Her face was white as printer paper, and I never figured out what had scared her, my rudeness or his politeness.

After that Grant spent an hour behind his closed door over some sheet of paper. Our walls are glass, so a closed door hides nothing but sound. For that whole hour I watched him fold the sheet, unfold it, then look through the glass at something past me, toward reception.

An old man whose purpose of visit was "mango," a bag behind the microwave and a sticky note in my purse were adding up to something. I had no proof, so I went back to counting what I could. After lunch Brad brought me the first customs declarations to sign, for Prasert's container of air conditioners, sat on the edge of my desk and watched me read every line.

"Do you always read like this?"

"I spent four years signing documents that I answered for with my paycheck."

"And now you answer with your visa." He smiled. "You have to admit, that's intriguing."

"The only thing that intrigues me is a drawer that comes up short," I said. "So far everything balances."

Brad laughed like you do at a customer's joke you've heard ten times. He tapped a finger on the line where I was supposed to sign.

I signed, because air conditioners were air conditioners, the weight matched the invoice, and I'd sent that invoice to Prasert myself on the day of my interview. Brad took the folder and left, and his joke about the visa stayed on my desk where the folder had been.

At six thirty the floor emptied out. Pim left last, not counting Grant and me, and on her way out, for the first time all week, she didn't say "see you tomorrow." I was just about to shut down my laptop when Grant opened his office door.

"Zuza. Stay, please. I need to talk to you."

In a week he'd never once said my name in that voice. Fourth nameplate, I thought, that's it, and I began mentally packing the box: the stapler, three pens and the packet of soy sauce that came with the desk.

In his office he didn't sit behind the desk. He dragged over the chair he puts candidates in and set it facing the guest couch. Sat me down in it. Then sat on the couch himself and leaned toward me,

fingers laced. The sun-bleached hairs on his forearms glowed gold again under the office lamp, and I got mad at myself for noticing five minutes before getting fired.

After six they shut off the central air in our building, and the office was heating up. Grant pulled at the collar of his T-shirt, and I saw the white strip of unburned skin and, under it, the damp hollow by his collarbone. He smelled like the same citrus with something warm underneath, like a person at the end of a long day. Weirdly, it didn't annoy me, though it should have. I scooted my chair back a foot and a half, as if I'd just gotten hot, and stared at the little elephant with the raised trunk on his desk.

"You don't know who you moved to the couch this morning," he said.

"Somchai Charoensuk. Purpose of visit: mango. I wrote it down."

"You wrote it down." He smiled, but his eyes stayed serious. "Zuza, how are you? Honestly. Did he scare you at all?"

I hadn't expected that question, so I told him the truth:

"He bowed to me. First. And Pim was white for half the day afterward."

"Pim has her reasons."

He rubbed the back of his neck like he didn't know where to start.

Wait. He wasn't going to fire me. He had something to tell me, something he didn't want to say, and he was watching me carefully, like he was checking whether I was okay.

"Remember my brother?"

"Donuts. Forty seconds."

"Forty seconds," he agreed. "His bar on Thonglor closed in May, even though right up to the end he kept telling me business was great. Ty owes half the street, and he took six million baht from people he didn't want to know anything about. The old man you moved is one of those people. Seven years ago his name was in the Bangkok Post next to a burned-down warehouse at the port."

"And what does he want?"

"One container. Maybe two. Through our port, under our papers." He paused. "He talks about it like he's asking me to drop off a package."

Under our papers. As of today, I was the one signing our papers.

I went hot, then cold. I pictured a room with no windows, a chair bolted to the floor and someone in a uniform asking me questions in Thai while I didn't understand a word. And I was so angry at him, at his goddamn flip-flops and his couch, that I wanted to stand up and slam the door.

That's when I started to guess why he was laying all this out for me. Was he worried about me? I looked him in the eyes and finally saw what had been in them since the start of the conversation. Guilt.

Well. Look at that. Even in handcuffs in a deportation holding cell, I'd probably be the last person to suspect he'd set me up. But his honesty, I had to give him that, was hot.

Ugh, Zuza. What's wrong with you. Somebody needs to spank Mali for ruining my life with all that stroking.

"What will be in the container?" I asked.

"I don't know. My brother didn't ask, and Somchai offered to tell me over lunch."

"And when's lunch?"

"There won't be lunch. I said no." Grant smirked with one corner of his mouth. "Politely. He said he's in no hurry. Which means he'll be back this week."

I worked it out. It wasn't much time, if by the end of the week they were going to bring me something to sign that couldn't be signed.

"It was Brad who suggested the power of attorney for your signature," Grant said. "I'm the one who signed it. I want you to hear that from me. So that later, if something happens, you won't think I planned from the start to set you up."

I didn't know what to do with my hands, so I put them on my knees, palms down.

Six months ago I found out the truth from somebody else's phone. I was sitting in the kitchen with my fiancé's phone glowing in my hand, and on it was everything he and Aneta had been saying to each other behind my back for two years. Neither of them came and sat down across from me. Neither of them said it to my face.

And this man in flip-flops was sitting across from me on his own couch, saying things that could make me quit tomorrow. Saying them to my face. The whole time he talked, he never once said "oh." I counted: zero tally marks. Turns out when he doesn't need time to finish reading the fine print, he skips it.

"Why me?" I asked when he stopped. "Why not Brad? He's a lawyer, he's your friend."

"I can't tell my brother, for obvious reasons."

"And Brad?"

Grant rubbed his face with his hands. Stubble was coming in on his chin, darker than his hair. He probably hadn't shaved because he hadn't slept.

"On Friday I said one sentence to Brad. A pretty stupid one. And today Somchai repeated it almost word for word. Might be a coincidence. Probably is a coincidence. I've known Brad twelve years."

On Friday I'd seen them through the glass with their beers, when I was looking under my desk for my other shoe. Brad was sitting with one leg up on the corner of the desk, laughing. Grant didn't seem to expect an answer from me.

"I need help," he said. "I need someone who can count and doesn't take anyone's word for it. In a week you recolored my whole calendar and didn't miss a single one of Ty's meetings. Pim is scared. I don't trust my brother. And you…"

What about me, he never said. He looked at me, then away, at the dark window where we were both reflected, him on the couch and me on the chair, with three feet of carpet between us. I waited. The end of the sentence never came, and I wanted very badly to hear it.

"I'll revoke the power of attorney," he said. "Tomorrow. It won't touch you anymore."

"Don't."

He raised his eyes to me.

"Why?"

"Because he needs an assistant with signature right," I said. "You revoke the power of attorney, and the day after tomorrow your Somchai understands that you guessed why he needs me, and that you will not give him anything to sign. It does not matter who tells him. Right now he thinks you're still deciding. Let him think so a little longer."

Grant leaned back on the couch and looked at me for a while.

"And what do you suggest?"

"I do not suggest anything. I am telling you how it is done at a bank." I'd leaned forward without noticing. I scooted the chair back to the foot and a half I'd put between us. "If a customer hands you a bill and you suspect it is a fake, you do not shout about it across the whole lobby. You smile and check it very slowly. You apologize, say the machine is acting up today, ask him to wait a minute and stall until the senior teller comes. And all that time the customer thinks everything is going fine."

Grant was looking at me like Somchai had looked at my nameplate that morning. For a second I was afraid I'd said something stupid. Then he laughed into his hand, and the lines at the corners of his eyes gathered.

"Senior teller," he repeated. "That would be me, I guess."

"That is nobody yet," I said. "But you can submit application."

He'd stopped laughing. He was just waiting, and I knew from how he waited that I hadn't said the main thing yet: whether I was staying or going. A sensible girl in my place would have stood up and left. But my visa was tied to this company now. If I left, I'd have to buy a ticket home within a week, and I had nowhere to go back to.

If I stayed, there were two years ahead, assuming Brad wasn't lying about his guy at immigration, and I no longer knew whether Brad was lying. My mother taught me to always have a plan. All I had was a man on a couch who'd told me the truth to my face, and apparently that was enough.

"Okay," I said. "I'll help. We keep the power of attorney, and I'll read the papers the way I did today, every line and very slowly. But you pay me extra for the mafia."

"Oh," Grant said, and smiled again, but now without any nerves, easy, like he had in the lobby. "And how much does the mafia cost, Miss Zee?"

"Forty-eight."

"I hope not million?"

My notebook was still on my desk, behind the glass. I made the forty-eighth tally mark in my head.

Chapter 6. Grant

On Thursday at nine, Zuza knocked one knuckle against the glass of my office, even though the door was open, and told me our mango friend had called.

"A young man, very polite," she reported. "Khun Somchai invites you to lunch today at twelve. A car will wait at the main entrance."

We both knew I'd go. On Monday we'd agreed Somchai should think I was still mulling it over, and a second no would've been an answer.

The lunch showed up on my calendar a minute later, with no location and no color, like one of Ty's lunches.

At five to twelve a black Mercedes was waiting out front, and the same young man who'd held the bag of mangoes opened the back door for me. The car smelled like leather and jasmine from a little vase on the back of the front seat. We crawled down Sukhumvit. Until the first red light I wondered why, of all people, I'd told Zuza everything on Monday.

There was nothing to tell my brother. He'd set this up himself, and now he was in Pattaya sending me photos of the sea and not picking up. I'd laid it all out for Brad on Friday, and on Monday my "big scene" line came back from Somchai, nearly word for word. Since then, whenever Brad stuck his head in my office, I watched what I said. I hadn't texted him about today's lunch. We'd shared a dorm room twelve years ago. Before this I'd never had to think about what I said in front of him.

And Zuza was the only person all month who hadn't tried to sell me anything, not even a laugh at my jokes. That was why I'd told her everything on Monday.

I'd pictured that evening differently. Like in the detective shows I watched in college instead of going to lectures: the two of us on the office floor, a pizza box between us, her pumps and my flip-flops kicked off by the couch, printouts spread across the carpet, Zuza circling in red what I'd missed. In real life she sat on a chair, straight as she'd sat at the interview, with three feet of carpet between us, and nobody had ordered pizza. But she'd said, "You will pay me extra for the mafia," and all the way home in the taxi I hummed something Thai from the driver's radio. I didn't know the words. I hadn't sung in ten years.

The car turned into a soi, narrow, under green branches, and stopped in front of an old wooden house, the kind Sukhumvit barely has left.

The restaurant had no sign. Inside it was cool and empty, except for a waitress who led me across a creaking floor to a back room with a window on the courtyard. Khun Somchai was already sitting there, facing the door, in the same light gray suit. When he saw me he stood up and pressed his palms together.

Nobody gave me a menu. Somchai ordered for us in Thai and took the long way around, like last time. His granddaughter in Boston had stopped complaining about the snow. She'd bought boots, like every American girl, and sent her grandfather a photo. He showed me the photo. I said the boots were nice.

Lunch took a long time. Somchai deboned the fish himself and didn't bring up business until the waitress had cleared the table.

"I am not rushing you, Mr. Reed," he said. "We need the first container in a month. I think that is enough time for you to arrange everything."

"What's in it?"

"Mangoes." He smiled. "That is what your assistant wrote down, is it not?"

I laughed, because laughing was more polite than staying quiet, and Somchai nodded approvingly.

"Let her handle the paperwork," he went on. "She typed my surname correctly the first time and never asked me to repeat it. At customs, a girl like that will be believed sooner than I would be."

I said I'd think about how to build the route. That the port was jammed in December. That I needed to talk to a guy at the port who was on vacation right now. I talked slowly and a lot, and I could hear it was Zuza's bank tactic: the system's acting up, just a minute, please. Somchai nodded at every word.

"Of course," he said when I'd finished. "The port is jammed, the right man is on vacation. I understand." He folded his napkin neatly. "Khun Zuzanna lives at Auntie Noi's, yes? A good house, an old one. Only when there's a thunderstorm, they cut the power to the whole house, because your auntie is afraid of lightning. It is uncomfortable for a girl alone in the dark, Mr. Reed. Tell her to buy a flashlight."

I promised to pass it on. I didn't even know the name of the woman who owned her guesthouse.

For dessert they brought mango, yellow, cut into a hedgehog. Just the one plate, and the waitress set it in front of Somchai, and he picked up a small fork.

"I will not offer you any," he said. "You would refuse anyway."

He said it warmly, almost with respect. All the way back I kept wondering why my refusing a mango had sounded like a compliment.

* * *

Zuza was waiting for me at the office. She stood by my desk with a laptop open on her bent arm and her cheeks burning.

"Singapore," she said, and turned the screen toward me. "It came to the front desk, marked urgent."

I'd been chasing this contract for two years. The Singapore chain ships rice and air conditioners out of Thailand every week, and until now they'd run it through the Hong Kong guys. I'd flown over three times to pitch them, and every time I heard it was "not the right time yet." Now they wrote that they wanted to discuss regular shipments. Their man in Bangkok, Mr. Tan, would be happy to meet tonight, because he flew home in the morning. He suggested the rooftop bar at his hotel on Sukhumvit, at eight.

I read the email twice. Then I looked at Zuza. She was smiling.

"You're coming with me," I said.

"Why?"

"Because at eight tonight I'll start promising Mr. Tan whatever he asks for, and you'll be stopping me."

She thought about it, then checked her watch.

"Then at six I leave," she said. "I have to stop at Auntie Noi's to change."

* * *

The bar was on the something-something-th floor. I got there at ten to eight, in the same shorts and flip-flops. Shorts are no big deal in Bangkok, even in nice hotels. Flip-flops with black grime along the edge of the sole are another story, and they let me upstairs only after the manager at the elevator got a couple of brown thousand-baht bills. I waited by the elevator. The doors opened, and at first all I recognized was the hair.

Zuza was wearing short dark shorts, strictly tailored, with a crease down the front, like a pantsuit someone had cut off at the thigh. She had on a black top, almost modest in front, and heels that made her half a head taller. She hadn't bothered hiding the bruise above her right knee, yellow-green, already fading, the size of my hand.

"That is Mali on a jet ski," she said, catching my look. "On Ko Lan, the day before the interview. She drives like the cops are after her."

"So that's what the pantyhose were for."

"What did you think?"

I'd come up with about six theories. Half of them weren't something to say out loud to my assistant, so I said I'd figured it was the office AC.

Zuza walked past me to the glass railing, and that's when I saw the top had no back. Just a thin tie at the neck, and bare skin below it all the way down to the dip where her spine disappeared into the shorts. At the base of her neck, between her shoulders, she had a tattoo the size of my index finger: a sak yant, five lines of old Khmer script, the kind monks do with a bamboo needle. Up there the wind was blowing and the evening was cool, November-style. Sukhumvit burned below us, red taillights streaming along the expressway.

Zuza looked down for a long time. I looked at her back and thought, honestly, I was about to tip right off this something-something-th floor. All those curves, the light dampness the humid air had left on her pale skin, the neat five lines of her sak yant. My jaw was somewhere on the floor.

"There is our twenty-third," she said, turning around. "From here it is very small."

Her voice snapped me out of some very unprofessional thoughts about a bare back. Focus, Reed. She was smiling, really smiling, almost like a kid. I'd never seen that smile on her, and I started to understand why she didn't want to leave. Bangkok, I mean.

I let her walk ahead of me back to the table. Was a back fetish a thing? Apparently it was now. Apparently I had one. Her back was the most beautiful, sexiest thing I'd ever seen in my life.

We sat down at the edge. Mr. Tan wasn't there yet. The waiter brought menus, and Zuza opened hers, saw the cocktail prices and closed it with a face like she'd been shown someone else's bank statement.

"How was lunch?" she asked, not lifting her eyes from the closed menu.

I was about to answer. I already knew I'd start with the month and get to her signature later. But then a short man in a linen jacket came out of the elevator, looked around and waved to us.

"I'll tell you later," I said, and stood up.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «Литрес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на Литрес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.