

### Chapter 3 - Jump in the Fire

*It is a man's own mind, not his enemy or foe, that lures him to evil ways.*

The hotel security guard blocks my path as I come through the lobby door. He looks more than a little like Manuel Noriega and grunts, "You like lady?" I wonder why he wants to know. I answer cautiously, "Yeah, I like ladies."

"You like lady in room?"

"Well, I'm going to try my best."

"Me get lady for you?"

I say, "No, that's okay. I think I can get my own, but, uhh, where's a good place to meet a lady?"

"You go Nana Plaza, *Soi 4*."

"Okay I'll try it. But I need sleep first."

Out of the last forty hours, I've slept only five. I need to recharge my batteries if I'm going to experience the legendary nightlife I've heard so little about.

Housekeeping's rearranged my belongings into neat little rows—finishing the organizing I had begun. It feels as though my wife has been here, tidying up behind me, and I resent the intrusion of my past. I close the curtains tightly, forcibly un-tuck the bed sheets, lay face down, and let consciousness slip away.

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The telephone rings, first in my dream, and then on the end table. I pick it up and hear, "You like a massage, sah?"

This is the weirdest greeting I've ever heard. "Uh, no, I'm sleeping."

"You sure, sah? Have lady, give massage number one, sah."

"What? No, no thank you. I'm sleeping."

"Sorry disturb you, sah."

Where the hell did he get the idea I wanted a massage? He sounded surprised when I said no. Mr. Security must have spread the word. A massage sounds pretty good, but I don't want a random girl sent up to my room. With five guardian angels to help me I ought to be able to find at least one earthly companion. I get dressed and head downstairs. Mr. Security stops me in the lobby. "You not want lady?"

"I go to get one now."

He glances side to side then says, "I like whiskey."

That's a funny thing to say. Is he implying I should bring him some whiskey if I want to bring a girl into the hotel? At least he thinks I can get a girl, a small price to pay for the vote of confidence. "Don't worry my friend. I'll take care of you."

The street is dark again, but now familiar. Loitering teens, sleeping dogs, revving scooters, and curbside vendors, all bustling beneath colored lights. Among the crowd are many odd couples: old men, fat men, ugly men, and a few relatively normal men, each with a beautiful young Thai woman at his side. They move through the crowd but separated from locals and tourists by an invisible barrier—insects in a jar.

Families, couples, and backpackers shuffle along shopping for bargains on logo t-shirts and embroidered pillowcases. Lost in the consumption of inanimate objects. I feel affinity for neither the odd-couples nor the tourists. I'm undefined for the moment. I was once part of one group, and quite possibly will soon be part of the other, filled with anticipation of being escorted, and dread at joining the parade of the judged.

The crowd grows thicker until shops, food-carts, cars, motorcycles, and people blend the street and sidewalk into one. I walk slowly, unsure of what I am looking for, but feeling it near. A narrow lane leads into a three-story horseshoe of noise and glitter. A neon cavern carved from a solid city block. If Hell has a gate it must look something like this. What better place to find a fallen angel?

I hesitate on the precipice between two worlds, questioning right and wrong, torn between the known and unknown. Something deep within me tells me to turn and walk away. But I've come too far, so I quash my reservations and allow the flickering lights to pull me in.

Women's voices call from all directions, "Hello, handsome man. Come inside please. Welcome, welcome." Their voices rise and fall like a stadium wave. I keep my focus forward until the central courtyard engulfs me. Thatched-roof beer bars with ragged barstools occupy the main floor. On all sides and the floors above, neon signs flash with names like: *Fantasia*, *Obsessions*, *Zombie*, *Angel Witch* and *Bottoms Up*.

Overwhelmed by choice, but without any basis for decision, I decide not to decide. Onto an escalator, up, up through a white plastic tube. I feel like I'm in a submarine—or a condom. Anticipation builds as I near the top, not in me, but in the assembled welcoming committee. I'm ejaculated onto the second floor into a frenzy of twenty, thirty, maybe forty screaming girls. Some dressed like cheerleaders, some in evening gowns, some in swimwear, all in high heels, all vying for my attention. The roles are reversed. I'm not the semen—I'm the egg.

They extol the virtues of their club, begging, pleading, pulling and pushing. I just wanted to look around. I didn't know having a dozen women fight for my attention was an option. It's not so bad, but the longer I delay, the louder they get. A cute girl in a Lycra mini-skirt says, "You come with me, yes?" I nod agreement and the competition sighs resignation.

Through a small red door, I duck my head and follow her up a narrow passage to a small room with an elevated stage. Everything nailed down is red: the bar, the seats, the walls—everything except the floor, the glass ceiling, and the silver poles that connect them. On stage, a dozen young women dance to a nameless techno beat, all of them

wearing thigh high boots, many of them smiling at me. Another dozen ladies dance on the glass ceiling, the view up their skirts unobstructed. My escort pushes me into a seat and her questions flow quickly, automatically. "What you name? Where you from? How long you stay?"

I answer politely but without any effort to extend the conversation. She's cute, but I don't want to settle for someone chosen at random from a screaming crowd. If I have a choice, then I want to choose. She notes my lack of interest and says, "I go outside now."

"Okay, bye-bye."

The song blends into the next, and a new lineup of girls take the stage. I exchange silly grins with a girl upstairs. She has muscular legs, a flat tummy, small firm breasts, and a broad bright smile. The only problem is she's up there and I'm down here. A middle-aged woman in a red cocktail dress pushes a young woman onto the seat next to me and slides her until we're shoulder to shoulder.

I say, "Hello there."

The girl smiles nervously and the older woman explains, "This Pie."

"Apple or cherry?"

"Name not Apple, not Cherry. Her name Pie."

"Hello Pie."

She smiles again and looks away, so I turn to her patron. "And who are you?"

"I mama-san, I here make sure you happy." Mama-san nods her head towards Pie and says, "You like her?"

I can't really see what she looks like when she is sitting so close, and I've already made some kind of connection with the girl upstairs. That feels more natural than having someone forced on me. I say, "She's very quiet."

Mama-san says, "Fifteen hundred baht she go with you all night."

"Is that right?"

"She take good care of you for sure."

So it's as simple as that—thirty bucks for an instant girlfriend. Quite a deal, but somehow unappealing. I want to say no, but it feels unnatural, almost insulting. As if to say this young woman's attention is not even worth a tank of gas. An answer is provided for me when the music changes and Pie excuses herself, "I go dance now."

The upstairs girl is nowhere in sight. Not upstairs, not downstairs, not at the bar, not even sitting on someone else's lap. A group of Australians in striped rugby jerseys parade by with backslaps, liberal use of the word "Oy," and seat themselves at the edge of the stage. I keep scanning the room for my upstairs girl and mistakenly make eye contact with Pie. She waves, and I wave back to be polite.

Another girl stands on the edge of the stage with spread legs, a red bandana tied to her head, and little else. One of the Australians stands directly in front of her. I can't see his face because it's firmly planted between her legs. She holds a silver pole to steady herself as the team cheers him on, "Oy, oy, oy..." The other girls look on in disbelief—as do I.

Bandana-girl pulls back and continues dancing. Her legs look weak, but she isn't finished with him yet. She places his beer bottle on the edge of the stage, lowers herself onto it until the longneck disappears, then she stands up and feeds the beer to him. I just shake my head and laugh. I thought this sort of thing only happens in movies.

Another player, with Flock of Seagulls hair jumps on stage and does the splits, then stands on one leg while holding the other over his head. I'm not sure if he's supposed to be a martial artist, a cheerleader, or a complete idiot. I'm sure he's very proud of himself, but I don't think anyone has come to this bar to watch his plea for attention; I know *I* haven't.

I wave goodbye to Pie in the sky, then slide quietly down the stairs. The greeter girls thank me for coming, and then turn to pounce on the next able seaman. I walk along the balcony trying to recalibrate my brain. Clearly a different code of conduct is in effect here, and restraint is not a part of it. I need to loosen up.

At the next bar, a girl in a pleated skirt leads me to a one-sided booth. The narrow stage running through the center of the bar is packed with girls. Their thigh high leather boots have red numbers pinned to them. Prodigy's "*Smack My Bitch Up*"—blares from a speaker directly over my head, but the girls don't dance—there isn't enough room. They hold the silver poles, shuffle their feet, and stare into space: sardines in bikinis.

I shift my gaze to each girl, overwhelmed by choice, but feeling a responsibility to choose well. I divide my attention among them and try to make eye contact. I drink half my *Beer Chang*, waiting for something to happen, but nothing does. No one else in here seems to be having much fun either, all Asian men in business suits: the well-dressed salary men from Narita. The waitress puts a plastic cup on the small table in front of me, tucks my tab into it, then motions to the stage. "You see, you like?"

"Yes, very nice."

"Which one you like."

"Well, number thirty-six is cute, and..."

She heads for the stage before I complete my shopping list and beckons sardine thirty-six. They make gestures in my direction, and then the waitress returns and says, "She want know where you from?"

"Where I'm from?"

"What country you?"

"I live in America."

The waitress makes hand signals, and number thirty-six shakes her head. The waitress explains, "She cannot go with you. She only go Japan man."

"And why is that?"

"Japan man pay big money. America man, cheap-Charlie."

I may or may not be a cheap-Charlie, but I sure as hell don't like it being determined by what I look like or where I'm from. I'm used to being rejected for not having *enough*

money, but money's not the problem here tonight; money I have, *attitude's* the problem.

"What if I gave her four thousand baht?"

The waitress gasps, "What you say?"

"I said, what if I gave her four thousand baht?"

"You crazy. For sure?"

"Yes, I'm crazy for sure. Go ask her."

The waitress looks back over her shoulder as she drags her feet to the stage. I flick of my fingers and nod to assure her. She delivers the message with a cupped hand. Thirty-six jumps off the stage, prances to my table, and presents her hand. "Hello, me Noy."

"Hello Noy, where are you from?"

"Not speak English."

The waitress rejoins us and I ask her to relay my question. The answer comes back. "She from Isaan."

I make a sad face as I stand to pull my wallet out. If Noy thinks I'm about to give her four thousand baht she's about to be disappointed. I put a hundred baht note on my drink tab and say, "It's time for me to go."

Noy tenses, alarmed by my implied departure, but is unable to speak. She prods the waitress to ask, "You take Noy with you?"

"Tell Noy I'm very sorry, but I don't go with girls from Isaan."

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Glamorous women watch my progress from the far corner of the balcony. They don't look like the dancing girls from the go-go bars. They look more like prostitutes from outer space. Glittering sequined mini-skirts, heavy makeup, over-styled hair, chokers, and five-inch heels. All eyes are on me as I walk into their midst. A tall blonde, wrapped in a skin-tight body suit with a v-neck down to her navel and bulging round breasts clutches at my arm and says, "Where you go handsome man?"

I look at her impossible cleavage and mutter, "Uh, I go over there..."

She slips her fingers into my belt loops and pulls me to her chest, not an unpleasant place to be. "Nothing over there handsome man. You like me?"

I can't form an intelligible answer, hypnotized by the fleshy globes squeezing up between us. She purrs, "You so handsome, so tall and good looking, nice body."

She's not only sexy, she has great taste in men. "I'll bet you say that to all the guys."

"No, only you honey. I like you number one. Look everyone, look my handsome man."

The other girls surround us, study my face, run their fingers through my hair, and stroke my arms. "Ooh, he is so big and strong. A real man."

I've been beamed down to planet of the sex-starved porn stars, surrounded by silver eye shadow, spandex, fake eyelashes, fake hair, and fake breasts. A tall redhead in a

*Guess* t-shirt strokes my arm with powder-blue fingernails. Something about the *Guess* logo is not quite right. It's trying to tell me something, to guess, but guess what? The original blonde grabs my collar. "You want go with me?"

She's so good looking, but, but, but... I ask, "Where we go?"

She puts one hand between my legs, then tilts her head to the side. "We go upstairs... I suck your cock."

Well *there's* something I've never heard a woman say before, and now I guess: I'm not hearing one say it now. They may be dudes with boobs, or chicks with dicks, but they're not women, not the kind of women I'm interested in. The voices in my head shout competing commands. The first says, *get the hell out of here*, and the second, *I thought you were going to loosen up*. I don't want to go upstairs, I don't want to let on I was fooled, and I don't want to let this opportunity pass me by. I grab a man-boob in each hand, squeeze them together, and issue a challenge, "Why go upstairs? Do it here, right now."

Space blonde tries to figure out if I'm serious, while I keep squeezing and hoping for rejection. I've never felt a fake boob before; they feel weird, like water balloons under leather. She/he/it senses my lack of intention, pushes me away, and whines, "You want go or not?"

"I think not."

It stamps its feet in a mock schoolgirl fit and slaps me on the backside as I make my way. It's a good thing I've only had two drinks. I've got to get out of here before I do something I regret. Past a group of girls outside the next bar, I look them over carefully, more interested in whether they're really girls than how attractive they are. I want to make sure I can tell the difference. They're dressed in denim and cotton, have simple hairstyles, and little makeup. So seemingly plain compared to the glamorous she-males, they must be real women. I'm ninety percent sure; and for now, ninety percent is enough.

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Back on the street, I watch the crowd walk by and ponder my next move. I don't have an itinerary; I don't have a map with a red line to follow, so I just wait for something to happen—some kind of cue. The sweet aroma and sizzle from a street-side pork barbecue teases me, but the pans washed in a puddle dissuade. A fat man with a cigar calls from the corner bar, "So, did you have a good time with the katoeys?"

"What's that?"

"You know, katoeys, ladyboys, transvestites..."

"Oh that. Actually I didn't know."

"Looked like you had a handful there."

I smile. "Yeah, both hands."

"You didn't... you know..."

"No. It was only a close encounter with the third kind."

"I thought you were a goner for sure."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"I thought maybe you were into it. You know they can suck the chrome off a trailer hitch."

"Is that right? And how do you know that?"

"A friend told me."

Something soft brushes my shoulder. I turn to see a young woman walking away, flicking her shiny long hair. Her plain white t-shirt and faded jeans are well pressed, and she fills them well, perfectly balanced between slender and shapely. I wonder if she intended for her hair to touch me. The contour of her bottom shifts with each step, and I realize that this is my cue.

I follow her past office buildings, restaurants and pool halls. The crowd thickens but I never lose sight of her flowing hair. Into a hotel parking lot, now with no one separating us, I get closer. Her reflection flashes in the glass revolving door as she pushes it into motion. Into the slot behind her, I feel the connection between us, both pushing the same door.

Loud music spills into the lobby from a ground-floor disco. She flips her cell phone closed and stops to have her ID checked at the door. I line up behind her, close my eyes, and inhale the sweet fragrance of her shampoo. I open them to watch her disappear into the glittering darkness. I flash my ID and step to follow but the doorman puts his palm on my chest and gestures to a long line of men.

I point at my vanishing angel. "I'm with her."

He smiles and points to the back of the line. "Lady free, man pay."

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Music thumps, and lights flash, but nothing's happening. The place is almost empty, but I don't see the girl with glowing hair. The deejay interrupts the music with an unintelligible announcement, and a group of young girls in red plastic jumpsuits parade onto a low stage in front of the dance floor. A new song comes on, much louder than before. The first few words are in English— "Are you ready?"— and the rest is in a Thai voice that sounds like Alvin the Chipmunk. The plastic-clad girls dance a choreographed routine patched together from step aerobics and MTV. One of the girls must be new, because she doesn't know the steps. She watches the other girls and copies them, always half a beat behind.

The few people present give the show scant attention. They aren't missing much in terms of artistry or athleticism, but perhaps some comedy. I can't imagine a show like this in the States. It's so corny, yet the girls are completely unaware of this possible judgment and their enthusiasm remains intact.

A flash of black hair obscures my view and changes my focus. I follow her to the bar, trying to remember the Thai phrase: *Can I buy you a drink?* when she turns suddenly and asks, "What pom-pim?"

I see her face for the first time, full lips, toothpaste ad smile, and fathomless eyes: beautiful, in a girl-next-door way, flawed only by the legacy of severe acne gone by. I ask, "What's a pom-pim?"

"You have a pom-pim?"

Oh, I get it. "No. I don't have a problem."

"Why you follow me? You follow me long time."

I'm thrown off guard by the accusation and its accuracy. "How do you know I was following you?"

"Me know everything."

"How did you get to be so smart?"

"Friend me talk on phone, say man watch me, man walk with me. Me see you in window. Me think funny, but not know why follow. So you tell me."

"Well, I saw the light dancing in your hair..."

She brushes a lock from her temple and looks up. "Me not have light in hair?"

"I mean you hair is shiny, I like it..."

"And?"

"I like to watch you walk, so I walk behind you to disco."

"You like disco?"

"I'd like to buy you a drink."

She wraps her arm in mine, and smiles. "Okay, handsome man, you buy me drink." The sudden contact surprises me and the warmth of her body melts my resolve. "What is your name pretty lady?"

"My name Gem."

"Really? I went shopping for gems today."

"You buy?"

"No."

"You not like pretty stone?"

"No, I like pretty you."

"*Paak waan.*"

I shout our order to the bartender then motion across the room. "Where is everybody?"

"Too early, people come midnight."

The plasti-girls leave the stage. Three people clap. If the plasti-girls' purpose was to get the crowd fired up, they've failed, but an unlikely couple does take to the dance floor to fill the void. I respect anyone with the guts to be the first onto an empty dance floor, but this couple stretches my limit: a fifty-year-old *farang* with a brush cut, beer belly, and a Foster's t-shirt tucked into his belt buckle, and a young *farang* with a full-on mullet and



skin-tight bell-bottom jeans. Are they dancing with each other or hoping the red jumpsuit girls will join them? Neither of them can dance worth a damn.

I turn to Gem. "Do you think they're gay?"

"Yes, for shore."

I think she's right, but it's very difficult to release my pre-conceived notions. I feel hypocritical judging them based on appearance, or rather lack of appearance, but I've never seen redneck homos before. Don't gay men know how to dress? Or dance? And a gay man with a *bad haircut*? No way.

"I'm not so sure."

"You like gay man?"

"No, not for me."

"What about ladyboy?"

"No, I like lady-ladies."

She suppresses a laugh, then taunts, "You shore?"

"I'm sure. Why are you laughing?"

"Me think you like ladyboys."

"Why do you think that?"

She holds an imaginary phone to her ear and says, "Friend me say you talk ladyboys Nana Plaza."

Sweet Buddha! Is there anyone that doesn't know about my escapades with the mystery sex? "I was only talking."

"Why you talk ladyboy?"

"I didn't know it was a ladyboy when I started talking."

"Lady and ladyboy not same-same. You not know?"

"Now I know."

"You think me ladyboy?"

Uh-oh. I steal another glance at her curves; she doesn't look like she is from outer space. "No, I think you lady."

"You shore?"

"Ninety-two percent."

We sit in a booth next to the dance floor. She cuddles up to me and rests an elbow on my shoulder. Her body is warm and soft and feels good next to mine. Remixed Jennifer Lopez and Madonna songs go by, and people join the dancing hillbillies on the dance floor: never more than two at a time, and always at a wary distance. She asks, "Where you from?"

"I'm from America, and where are you from?"

She gives me a measured smile, then states the obvious, "Me from Thailand!"

"Oh really, what part of Thailand?"

"Isaan."

"I heard that Isaan girls only like Japanese men."

"Where you hear like this?"

I hold an imaginary cell phone to my ear and say, "My friend told me."

"Me not like Japan man."

"Why not?"

She studies my face, considering my reaction, then extends her pinky finger. "Japan man like this."

"Oh really, and how do you know? Wait, let me guess..."

"Friend me say."

"These friends of yours seem to know a lot."

"Friend me know everything."

"Do they know what I'm going to say next?"

She reaches for her phone. "You want me call?"

"No... let's dance instead."

The bass of All Saints remix of "*Lady Marmalade*" pumps through me, and the world fades away as I focus on Gem and only Gem. She moves slowly, pulsing on every second beat, stretching it out, working it. I mimic her tempo and movements, keeping constant eye contact, and for a short time, time disappears. Ninety-four percent.

She asks, straining to speak above the music, "How long you stay Bangkok?"

"Two more days, then I go to Koh Samet."

"Samet very beautiful."

"So are you."

"Oh, you *paak waan* for shore."

"What's *paak waan* mean?"

"It mean you have sweet mouth."

"Would you like to taste it?"

She doesn't respond for a moment, then she leans in and kisses me. Wow! I was expecting more witty banter, not wet contact. My face must show my surprise because she laughs and asks, "What you do tonight?"

Still a little starry-eyed I reply, "Something with you."

"You want take me with you? Where we go?"

"Uhh, my hotel."

"What we do?"

"Something fun."

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Arm in arm into the night, where tourists shop and gawk at the spectacle around them, a spectacle I'm now a part of. I wasn't looking forward to this walk of shame, but I barely notice the other people on the street, much less if they notice me. We stroll through the crowd talking, joking, and really having a good time. She shows me her

favorite shops along the way, and though I'm perilously close to being a shopping dog, her animated explanations entertain me the whole time. She is graceful, direct, gentle, seductive, polite, and utterly captivating.

The rising silhouette of my hotel reminds me of a promise. I squeeze Gem's hand. "I need to go to a liquor store."

"You want drink?"

"No, I buy for my friend."

"You shore friend want drink? Me think for you."

"My friend is thirsty for sure."

She leads me to a grocery store cash register with a wall of alcohol behind it. "What you friend want?"

"He likes whiskey."

"Thai whiskey?"

"Yeah, that sounds good."

She relays my request to the cashier. He puts the bottle of *Mekong Whiskey* on the counter a little harder than necessary, as if he's annoyed. Gem reports, "Thai whiskey for friend ninety baht."

"Okay."

"You want drink for you?"

"No. I'm okay. You can get something if you want."

"Me like tequila. You like tequila?"

"Tequila is fine."

She asks the clerk, but doesn't like the answer and turns to me for approval. "Tequila one thousand baht."

Ten times the price of Thai whiskey. I'm not excited by the prospect of buying a bottle I won't have more than a sip of, but I don't want to be a cheap-Charlie either. The clerk stands by for instructions. I shrug. "Up to you." She thinks about it, then fetches an oversize bottle of *Chang Beer*. Forty baht. One dollar. A woman who saves me money? Be still, my beating heart.

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The brown paper bag crackles as we enter the lobby. Mr. Security breaks off his conversation with a well-dressed woman, and I put the bag in his hands. The woman's curiosity's aroused by the exchange, and Mr. Security looks uncomfortable. He's either forgotten our agreement or he's struggling to think of a way to justify it to the woman, who, for all I know, is his boss, or perhaps wife. I don't want to get him into trouble, so I add, "Happy Birthday, my friend."

He puts the bag on the counter and asks to see Gem's ID. She has it ready. He records the number and stores the card in a vinyl pocket. The whole transaction, except for the

whiskey, is clearly routine. He eyes her over and silently conveys his approval. Ninety-six percent.

Up the elevator, and down the hall, she rests her head on my shoulder. "You *jai dee*."

"What's that?"

"Mean you have good heart."

I fumble with the lock, and the door swings open. She enters without reservation, and sits on the bed. I turn the stereo on, and the stage is set; but that's a problem in itself. I don't want a staged encounter. Having sex is not enough. I want her to want to be with me. It's been so long since a woman enjoyed my company, I have to prove it's still possible.

I sit on the bed with a glass of *Chang Beer* and a pocket-size *English-Thai/Thai-English Dictionary* in hand. She asks, "Why you have book?"

"You teach me Thai, okay?"

She smiles. "Okay, and you teach English?"

We take turns thumbing through the book. My struggle to pronounce simple words provides amusement, but doesn't really expand our communication. I get up to find my flirtation cheat sheet. She watches closely as I dig through my bag. "What you look?"

I wonder if she's worried that I'm going to pull out a weapon or some sexual appliance. "Don't worry. Something good." I return to the bed armed only with a piece of paper. She grabs my arm and tries to see, but I wrestle it out of reach, keeping the back of the sheet towards her. "Don't worry, I'm going to tell you."

"Okay, you tell me."

"People not unlucky gesture."

"What?"

"People not unlucky gesture."

She squints at me. "Why you say that?"

"Because I like your eyes."

"Oh, oh, oh, not say *kone my sooeye taa*, say like this *koon me sooaye dta*."

"What's the difference?"

"First one means, people not do rude thing."

"*Koon me sooaye dta*."

"Good. Now you *paak waan*."

"Okay, let me try another one. You have tiger edge verbal skill." She's smiling so I must have gotten it right. I'm on a roll, might as well keep going. "You have shirt prime minister ... why are you laughing?"

"Me know what you try say, almost right."

"Okay, how about this one. I want to kiss you."

"Now me understand."

I lean forward and kiss her on the lips. She responds gently at first, then with growing intensity as our mouths press firmly together. My cheeks warm, and by the time we

separate, I'm swimming in delirium. "Hmm, that was very nice. I haven't been kissed like that since before I got married."

"You married?"

"Divorced."

"What happen wife you?"

"I don't want to think about that right now. I'll tell you later okay."

"When later?"

"Tomorrow."

"You want me stay all night?"

Wow. She's really direct. "Yes, I would like that very much."

"Okay, you go shower now."

Maybe too direct. "Okay. You want shower too?"

"Me go after."

I pull the water control out all the way—cold water. I turn it all the way to the right—cold water. I turn it all the way to the left—cold water. I really do not need a cold shower right now. I fiddle and wait but nothing seems to makes a difference. I try the sink and hot water flows freely. What is wrong with the freaking shower?

Anxiety and the bathroom mirror trigger an unwanted memory: *From across the bed, I closed the gap gently, lovingly, desperately, my intentions good, an outward expression of love. I kissed, but her lips stiffened. I caressed, but her body lay listless. I persisted because my very future depended on it, not a promising future, but the only one I knew. Then I was on top of her, trying to make love, trying to make her love me, but no amount of trying could make it so.*

*I had the use of her body and nothing more. She waited in silence, absent from the moment, pretending to be anywhere but there, then, with me. I felt myself disappearing, becoming something else, something I didn't want to be. And so it ended.*

*The bathroom door slammed behind her. The shower curtain snapped into place. I sat on the bed's edge bewildered, wondering what had just happened. It wasn't love or even lust. It was something ugly, cruel and devoid of humanity. I vowed I wouldn't do it again. I wouldn't cling to a loveless marriage, imitating what I'd once done with passion. I vowed it would be the last time I'd sleep with my wife.*

*I took her place in the shower and stood where she'd stood, moments earlier. A line of soaps, powders, lotions, and perfumes mocking me from the windowsill—all chosen to erase any evidence of my existence. The soapy water ran off my body, and like my existence, went down the drain. I wiped the fog from the mirror, and wondered who was looking back at me. He looked like me, only older, worn-out, beaten, empty. My reflection a ghost of what I once was.*

Into the icy spray, and the cold water snaps me back to the present. My skin shivers into goose bumps, my nipples turn to stone, and my privates shrivel to embarrassing proportions. I unwrap the hotel soap, scrub myself down as fast as I can, and rinse the

suds away. I wrap a towel around my waist, walk into the room and announce, "Your turn. No hot water."

"No pom-pim."

"Why no problem? Because you like cold water? Or because you know how to get hot water?"

"Same-same, no pom-pim."

She's so cute, and in a few minutes she is going to be cute and naked—a great combination. I liberate a condom from my collection, tear the package open and rest it behind the lampshade so I'll be able to get it when I need it without appearing too presumptuous.

The bathroom door opens with a gust of steam above and Gem below in a tightly wrapped white towel. I look at the fog on the mirror and ask, "How did you get hot water?"

"Me tell you, no pom-pim."

She's very petite without shoes. I feel a brief twinge of disappointment and then the towel drops. Her body is incredible, more than I expected, hoped or dreamed, all the right curves in all the right places, highlighted by an amber gem in her belly button. Her breasts are wonderfully shaped and her nipples beckon to me. My jaw must be hanging open, because when I make it up to her face, she's looking at me with a big smile.

I pull her close, and the benefit of the mirrored walls becomes apparent. I'm surrounded by angels. I'm starving for the power of her passion. I want to fill her with lust. I want her to give herself completely. My pleasure will be giving pleasure. I'm going to please her, just to prove I can. I kiss and caress every part of her, using my body to stimulate hers, until glistening moisture offers confirmation. One hundred percent.