

Beg Me

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BROWN SKIN
BOOKS



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One night in Bangkok. Right. Now how does that dumb 80s tune go? *You'll find a god in every golden cloister, and if you're lucky then the god's a she.* One of them anyway. But my gods tonight came in pairs. One lovely Thai girl and one beautiful giant of a black man, both nude, both patiently waiting for me in my room at the Narai Hotel.

The guy. The guy was named Keith, about six foot two, head shaved, his chiselled body this canvas in mahogany muscle, and he stood like a soldier in this black leather harness get-up with his hands clasped behind his back, his cock this dangling *thick* cord that hung with a kind of arrogance. I was already wondering how big he was when hard. Then there was the girl. The girl was cute and petite with a smile of brilliant white teeth and dark almond eyes, her skin this incredible shade of golden hue, her hair cut short. I was told her name was Busaba. Cat-like, she stretched out on the rug, propped up on one hand, and I had a view of a lovely hourglass waist, small breasts with tiny brown nipples, and her pubic hair was shaved. Someone knew my tastes awfully well.

I know, I know. Back up. What was I doing in Bangkok? A sprawling metropolis of stone and glass cubes that starts right at the airport and just keeps on going. As your cab takes you in, you wait and wait for a centre, for a change in this almost cartoon horizon of skyscrapers, but it never comes. Damn good thing you fix your fare at the start. Four hundred *baht* later, and I stood in the huge foyer of the Narai, which isn't the Ritz or the Savoy back home, but better than I expected. A vast room with a balcony, a well-packed mini-bar, and your choice on television of ABC (the Australian Broadcasting Corporation), HBO, CNN, Asian MTV and a couple of channels in Thai and Chinese that were completely incomprehensible to me. My two nudes weren't there, not when I first checked in.

No, I was to be lonely for a couple of hours first.

And I still didn't know why I was there.

Only three weeks earlier, I had got an email from Jeff Lee, the brother of my old friend Anna. Anna was my massage therapist for years, and

under her sensitive fingers, all your muscle knots and tension would slip away, and you'd feel like pudding on the table. She knew traditional Thai massage, Swedish and Shiatsu, and I gave her a lot of business after vigorous workouts at the dojo or after one of my 'quick money' courier jobs or favours for friends with cash incentives (which usually involved travel and neck cramps, bruises, and chalking up one more person who held a grudge against me). I considered her a friend.

Oh, God. Anna dead. My friend was dead.

I cried, but we let ourselves off the hook sometimes when we cry, don't we? It's easier to cry than to get pissed off. I knew I was going to be angry soon because injustice was implied in the email—that someone had killed Anna. She hadn't died through the cruelty of accident. Her brother knew what I did for a living, and he wouldn't want me so fast over there unless he needed to find somebody and then *get* them, to help them kicking and screaming into their next reincarnation before Nirvana.

One thing I had learned about rich people. At a certain level of wealth, they consider it more cost-effective to put you on a plane and bring you to *them* for a meeting.

So: Bangkok. Crowded. Corrupt. Dazzling. Dangerous. One foot out of the Narai, and I'm telling myself, Teresa, my love, you are the only African chick for *miles*. I'm about five foot eight, but I never felt as tall as I did with the sea of golden faces washing all around me, curious eyes noticing my dark brown complexion for even white tourists are much more familiar here. Australians. Americans. Brits. White South Africans. Creepy guys wanting the fleshpots of Asia, amazingly fat and pasty looking white tourist women from the Midlands who should *not* wear tank tops and pink shorts. The city's reputation for hucksterism is well earned. 'You want Patpong?' demand the taxi drivers. 'Patpong is far away, other direction! I take you!'

Liar. Patpong Market is straight up Silom Road, and the tip-off is the stretch of sidewalk stalls selling everything from silk sarongs to cheesy wooden knick-knacks to pointless T-shirts. I looked down the street and suddenly cried out, 'Holy shit!'

Because a baby elephant was marching towards me. The fellow holding its leash or whatever will charge you forty *baht* to feed it a couple of bananas. The elephant actually shoves the banana into your hand to coax you into paying. 'No, thanks,' I said. I felt sorry for the poor creature.

Patpong. Open doorways with topless Thai girls listlessly dancing around poles, and stalls full of cheap sweatshirts and hara-kiri knives. I do better at Brick Lane Market on a weekend.

I could tell you about the Royal Palace and how I was led all over Creation by this driver of a *tuk-tuk* (imagine a golf cart taxi with an engine like a sick speedboat), but I hadn't come to play tourist. All of that was involuntary, killing time until my client freed up his schedule. A message came in the afternoon left at the reception desk that he would see me at his office in Sampeng at four-thirty (and just where is Sampeng?). I wondered why it had to be so late as I returned to my room—

Which brings me back to the beautiful black man and sweet little Thai girl. She said something in Thai that I didn't understand at all, but he echoed an English translation: 'Welcome to Bangkok, Miss Knight. We're here compliments of Ah Jo Lee.'

I began to laugh, looked them up and down and said, 'This hotel keeps one hell of a mini-bar.'

Introductions were made, and then I walked up to Keith, and I had to stand on my toes to kiss him. His mouth was soft and yielding, and he was clever with his tongue, letting mine come to his. *I can feel an angel sliding up to me.*

I expected his arms to gather me up and wrap around me, but he kept them loosely at his sides. What I felt instead were tiny fingers that reached around to undo my blouse. The girl was pure subtlety, such a light feathery touch that I wanted her to do more, and that was the idea. But for the moment, I had too many choices, and now as I kept leaning in for this man's mouth, this warm hard bar of flesh pressed against my belly.

Damn Helena, I thought.

As I confirmed later, Jeff had called up my good friend back in London, for he was only one degree off six in separation (Anna was Helena's massage therapist, too). And he must have asked after my tastes. Helena wouldn't have just blurted them out—she would have placed a couple of calls and found the right individuals in Bangkok to provide my entertainment.

Last year I experienced something of a personal revelation, and my mind had been doing cartwheels over the implications ever since. I admitted to myself that I liked girls sometimes, more than I ever thought

I could and that I may have to do something about that, like act on it occasionally. What messed me up with weird self-inflicted guilt trips was how I didn't seek *involvement* with women. I still wanted romance with a guy, yet I really liked sometimes, I really wanted—

I turned around and took what I wanted. I hadn't had it for quite a while. She was petite and cute and perfect, and I wanted to dominate her. My mouth covered hers and kissed her passionately as I cupped and kneaded her small breasts and backed her up until she fell onto the bed. She was wet to the touch, and I slipped two fingers inside her, prompting a high keening moan. I loved her skin next to mine, I loved the intertwine of gold and brown and gold and brown, the same way I had once delighted in my colour mixed with a former lover's whiteness. But my past lover was not nearly as submissive, always a mild power struggle with her, and while I enjoyed that occasionally and relished the competition, I didn't want that now. I looked over my shoulder, and Keith was doing all he could not to jump in, unconsciously fondling his balls and his enormous cock.

I made her come twice, her eyes shut so tight, mouth open, and the way she arched her back. God, she was exquisite. She hugged me like a child afterward.

'I want to watch you two for a bit,' I said.

I had seen others doing it before, but these two fascinated me. I didn't notice them consciously performing. It was like they were well matched, the way they kissed and she embraced him. He mounted her and thrust into her, his whole body this ebony building about to collapse on top of a delicate flower, and my eyes focused hungrily on details, the tension in his arms against the bed, his perfectly round ass bracketed by these lovely calves suspended in the air, such dainty golden feet, and then his thick dick retracting out of her, this cable of hard brown flesh. He couldn't put himself completely inside her...

I shut my eyes and lay back and moaned, and they stole that moment to pounce. They both read me so well. Her little hands were gripping my wrists and holding me down as his huge palms slid down my belly and cupped my ass. I surrendered my mouth to hers, let her tongue play on my left areola as *ohhhhhh*, God, the dome of his penis nudged my lips below, and then he was filling me up to the hilt. She let me go for a moment to embrace him, and then he was thrusting hard, making me

lose myself. I was confused briefly as he made us change positions, taking charge, and then we were on our sides, Keith back inside me from behind, and his cock was hammering away as her fingers danced, as her mouth made this butterfly assault on my nipples, my belly, her fingers straying to my clit. I could feel his brown chest behind me, his hot breath on my neck and then gentle teeth closing on my earlobe. She sucked on my breast and worked my clit until I came with epileptic, shuddering spasms.

It was tag-team action from then on through the night. The girl nestled into me, kissed me sweetly and used her hands to bring me to orgasm three more times. Then he woke up, and it was about that expansive chest and powerful arms, about filling me. I went down on him once to get him off, wanting to give him pleasure, and when we were done, and he asked if I wanted some wine from the complimentary bottle Jeff had provided, I asked him, laughing softly, 'What are you doing *here*, man?'

He laughed with me, nodding, understanding. He had talked so little during the night that it was only now I could discern he was American. 'I know, I know... I'm studying, kind of. Theravada Buddhism. It's changed my life. Really. It's given me peace. Busaba turned me on to it.'

'How did she...?'

'We're together,' he said simply.

'Oh.'

He laughed and relished my discomfort for a moment then let me off the hook. 'Relax, this is a job to us, and I think I can speak for both of us that we're enjoying our work tonight! We both only do girls. Busaba doesn't have to work so much these days, she's got a day job managing an accounting department, but I need to pay for school. I recommended her—I knew she'd be interested. She's never been with a black girl before.'

His eyes flashed with amusement as he added, 'She was really curious!'

'That explains it,' I said. 'You two have such fantastic chemistry.'

He smiled a thank you and confessed, 'Sometimes it's hard to hide. Most of our clients are these rich Thai chicks who are more comfortable when they think we're strangers to each other.'

We talked about Thai attitudes and our apprehensions, and he was stoical.

‘Some people I know have bad experiences, but I don’t have much to complain about,’ he said. ‘You know when Tiger Woods came out here, they greeted him like a hero.’ I looked at him blankly for a moment, and he smiled and explained, ‘His mother’s from Thailand, a mix of all kinds of things. So is his dad really. For people here, he was black second, half-Thai first.’

‘Wild,’ I said, shaking my head. ‘But... Don’t *you* ever feel...?’

I wasn’t sure which word to choose. I wanted to say *exiled*, but he had clearly imposed this on himself. Lonely? Maybe I was projecting.

In London, I have never felt truly at home, but more at home than other places, and my visit years ago to the land of my great-grandparents in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan had answered some questions, but left me restless in other ways. I think if I lived in a place like this I would have to slowly forget who I was, always looking outwards.

‘I know what you mean,’ he said. ‘But when I feel down, she says “Call home, baby” and I ring up a couple of friends. It’s all good. By the way, she can speak English. She’s just shy ’round new people.’

I pointed to the sleeping girl and asked, ‘How did you two meet?’

‘States. She got ripped off right out of LAX. One minute she ain’t paying attention—boom, the next second her bag is gone. She was freak-ing out, saying how she couldn’t believe she’d been so stupid, so careless, and I’m going, chill, babe. Here’s the name of a hotel, here’s my cell, here’s fifty to tide you over until you get set up. Next day, I get a call—it’s my day off, so I show her the city. By the evening... We haven’t been away from each other since.’

‘You followed her back here.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Wow.’

It always boggles my mind whenever I hear stories that have a fairytale quality. Granted, theirs was an X-rated fairytale. I could see how it wouldn’t bother a guy much to find out his girlfriend was a high-priced escort for lesbians. Hell, most men would *love* the idea, would want to accompany the gal to work. I guessed right that she was the one who persuaded him to join the business. She must have said the equivalent of: are you kidding? They’ll be panting for you here. It would take the peculiar emotional detachment for professionalism that I had seen before, that people said I brought sometimes to my assignments. But I could see they

didn't take each other for granted either. There was something they kept for each other. If sex was an art then tenderness was to be bestowed on strangers just on rare occasions like a granted privilege.

And they had given some of theirs to me.

We talked, Keith and I, for quite a while. He mentioned that Busaba had always wanted to see Europe, and I smiled and understood. Yes, I said, you should come. You should see London. Visit me as friends.

'I'd like that,' he said.

I stole back under the covers and hugged his girlfriend, and she stirred and held me tight. I felt him spoon into me and her delicate fingers touching my mound, her breath on my face and his on my shoulder. We slept like that until the early morning hours.

They told me that they had only been booked for the night, but that they could stay a while. We ordered breakfast in bed, made love twice more, and when I woke again around twelve there was a paper on the night table with their address and phone number, Busaba's dainty handwriting that told me, 'You are SO beautiful!!!'

Sweet.



My client, Jeff Lee, wasn't Thai. He was Chinese. Here they called him 'Ah Jo' but that was apparently just Chinese for 'Jeff'. (Anna is Cloy Hen. Oh, God, *was* Cloy Hen. Her parents had picked 'Anna' because they liked the sound of the name.) He and his sister grew up in London, where their father was a rice importer, and he used to say, 'I fucking hate Chinese people'—which was a rather peculiar thing for a Chinese guy to say.

But Jeff would tell you all about how he and Anna were considered *juk-sing*, 'without culture' as second-generation kids and not the alleged real deal from the Mainland or Hong Kong. I've seen enough nonsense in my own race that I could kind of relate—African versus Caribbean, what they say people are supposed to be like from Jamaica or the Bahamas or wherever, and then you get into mixed-race kids, Somali attitudes versus blah, blah, blah. Tiresome business.

I've had my own issues at times with Asian men. In my experience, they don't take too well to female authority, but I know that's a culture thing, and well... You sure don't see too many of them with black girls, now do you? And I doubt they enjoy the fact that many Asian girls, on the other hand, have no problem with hooking up with our brothers.

I'm happy to say that Jeff Lee wasn't like that. He always said he wanted his sister to be happy, and she showed me last year a holiday shot of the three of them—Anna, her brother and her boyfriend of a few months, I think his name was Craig. Ah Jo Lee had a cigarette dangling from his smiling lips, and his arm was in a macho half-embrace around the grinning boyfriend. Good-looking guy with funky dreads.

Jeff had started out in rice buying like Dad, but he made his fortune in Bangkok in all kinds of shady stuff. Surprisingly, not in what you'd expect. I'd be a hypocrite if I knocked him, since I've been known to shell out five quid for a pirate DVD now and then in Shepherd's Bush. He lived well—very well.

An hour before our appointment he had a car sent around to pick me up from my latest tourist stop after I checked in with the Narai by phone. I was eternally grateful for the ride, since Bangkok is so bloody huge and it would have been hopeless for me to direct a taxi driver around.

Then we switched to a riverboat, and I found myself being led back onto dry land into Sampeng, Bangkok's Chinatown district, past the Art Deco splendour of Hualamphong Station through these tiny narrow alleys where I got jostled and had to move to get out of the way of push-carts with mangoes and stuff I can't even identify. There was a steady chatter of both Thai and Chinese, and I got a couple of stares of curiosity. I didn't have a clue where we were going. We doubled back at one point, and Jeff told me later this was 'a regular business precaution'. When I stopped to gawk at the multiple classic terraces of the Tang To Gung gold shop, my escort got impatient and snapped staccato Thai at me to come on.

I couldn't find Jeff's office building again if I tried.

As I was shown into his study, I was surprised to see a Buddha that looked more Thai than Chinese, and all the furniture was in tasteful muted browns and yellows. They sure liked their Art Deco in this neighbourhood. I don't know if I could have lived with red walls, but I guess it worked for him. Ah Jo 'Jeff' Lee came out from behind a desk to give me a hug.

Thanking his assistant in fluent Thai, he switched to English: 'Hello, Teresa, how are you?'

I heard the remnants of his Thames Estuary accent. Jeff Lee had always been something. He had a degree from the LSE and could have

done anything, but I suppose he found some doors closed for him ‘back home’, and judging from his surroundings, he had made the right choice.

‘I liked the welcoming committee,’ I said.

It took him a second. He laughed and replied, ‘Oh! Good, good. Hey, if you can’t get properly laid in Bangkok, I think the civic pride is wounded.’

‘You have anybody serious these days?’ I asked politely.

He rolled his eyes. ‘Teresa, I have no time for all that. Yeah, yeah, Anna used to give me that same look.’

Anna. It was time to get down to business.

‘I’m so sorry, Jeff. Tell me what happened. And what you need.’

He looked at me a moment then pulled out a drawer of his desk. ‘You’ll want to see these.’

He tossed a manila envelope across the blotter then turned his back on me, facing the window. ‘I don’t want to look at them. Once was enough. I threw up.’

I could see why. Inside were photos of Anna, and my own stomach churned. Sweet Jesus. It wasn’t that she was dead in the shots—she looked very much alive—a lovely Chinese girl with a short fringe, my good friend. My friend nude with her arms bound behind her back, her small golden breasts exposed and her body shiny with perspiration. Someone had arranged a warped, ingenious way of spreading her legs, bound by cords leading in different directions. A rather rude, long and vividly red dildo was half out of her vagina.

In one shot, she was blindfolded (it said something, though I don’t know *what*, that her captor had chosen the blindfold to be the same scarlet as the phallus). What disturbed me more was that I could see the red in her cheeks from being slapped. A welt was rising on the corner of her mouth. It must have been just the beginning—

‘Was there a ransom demand?’ I asked, my voice soft.

He turned and looked perplexed for an instant. ‘No, no, she wasn’t kidnapped—as far as I’ve been able to learn anything myself.’

I was confused. ‘But...?’ I ended my question with a gesture to the photos, their white backing facing out to spare him the ghastly sight.

‘Some sick fuck sent me these!’ he snapped.

‘Yes, I got that part, that’s ob—’

‘Teresa, they’re saying she died in a drug buy! That she died with a gun in her hand, trying to shake down some bloody dealer! No way! She wasn’t an addict or anything like that.’

‘Whoa, whoa, whoa!’ I cut in. ‘Back up. You show me these, and now you’re saying... Look, take me through it slowly.’

I sat down and listened patiently as he reconstructed what he knew, telling me part of it and showing me news clippings to fill in the blanks. His eyes glistened with tears, but he wasn’t parading his grief to impress me. I knew he was barely holding on, a young man normally so proud and in control, rendered helpless.

He didn’t have much. Anna had died in Brooklyn. She was found with an armour-piercing round making a huge hole in her belly, a stomach wound that would have been excruciatingly painful before she bled to death in a filthy alley. The guy she supposedly tried to shake down was an ex-con, 25, Hispanic, in and out of psychiatric institutions as well as prison, with a black gym bag full of crystal meth. One of the tabloids had made much out of how Anna was provocatively dressed: black leather jacket over a short black half-T, black mini and thigh-high black boots, *no* underwear.

Jeff passed me a Polaroid shot, a close-up of what looked like a tattoo. There were symbols I didn’t recognise, not that I knew anything about tats. My girlfriends who have them usually go for more conservative choices like a rose or if they’re white, those Celtic designs. Never liked them myself, never ever wanted one.

‘They found this on her inner thigh,’ he said. ‘I paid for the laser treatment to have it removed. We had Anna cremated, but still... I didn’t want that mark on her before... you know, we...’

I looked at him questioningly.

‘They’re *Thai* characters,’ he explained. ‘It means “I live for death” but that’s not what Thai gangs use over here—it’s borrowed from a Vietnamese gang. Don’t you see? Some clown must have *assumed* she was Thai because she mentioned that I lived here, so he went and cooked that up. The needlework is *fresh*, days old if even that! This was all staged.’

I couldn’t reach that conclusion yet. And I didn’t understand those photos of her trussed up and hurt, yet Anna winding up dead in a dark alley.

‘Anna was a massage therapist, for God’s sake!’ I said. ‘What could she have been into that would make someone want to kill her? Who was she running with and what was she doing in America?’

‘I don’t know! She was getting into some weird scenes.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You remember Craig, her boyfriend for a while?’

‘Never got to meet him,’ I said.

‘He got her into this black BDSM group—leather, cuffs and chains. It was when she started hanging around with those people that—’

‘*Hold it,*’ I snapped. ‘Be careful where you go with this.’

‘Teresa, they like edgy shit that’s—’

I tried to stay calm. ‘Who’s “they”, Jeff? Who are “those people”? If you’re going to pull out this whole “blacks and Africans are more promiscuous” shit, you’d better remember where we are, right?’

‘I’m not saying that—’

‘I hope not,’ I went on, ‘because we are in one of the top cities for buying *children* for sex play, and how twisted is *that*?’

‘It is a mostly black group, Teresa,’ he insisted gently.

‘Well, it certainly isn’t all black if she got to join.’

‘No,’ he relented.

‘So why even mention it?’

‘Sorry.’

I didn’t say anything for a moment, trying to cut him a bit of slack. Sometimes people used identifiers in the most unconscious but stupidly careless ways, the force of bad habits. Maybe I was being over-sensitive, too, when he meant ‘those people’—as in ‘those into kink’.

So the photos of her nude and bound didn’t suggest a kidnapping.

Then presumably she had *voluntarily* let herself be photographed like this.

Poor Jeff. His sister was dead, and someone had psychologically assaulted him by sending these pictures, forcing him to think even for the briefest second about the private sexuality of his own sister—to confront certain truths about her he didn’t want to know or shouldn’t have to know. That she could actually *like* being slapped around a little or might have got off being photographed in the most lewd fashion.

Yeah, that would disturb the hell out of me, too.

‘What do you know about this group?’ I finally asked. ‘How could you even know whether there are a lot of black people in it or not?’

He looked embarrassed. ‘I sent a couple of guys I know back home to talk to Craig about it.’

‘You *what?*’

He put his hands up, saying quickly, ‘They didn’t hurt him. Honestly!’

‘But I’m sure your guys were persuasive,’ I said sarcastically. ‘Now tell me how you’re any different to any other organised crime thug, Jeff!’

‘This is my sister, Teresa! I didn’t know what else to do. You were off on a job somewhere, and he was the last guy who was close to her. Anna mentioned this group once to a cousin of ours in an email, said *he* got her into it. Her boyfriend, Craig. He was working in America for a while on a contract, and she flew over to visit him there. That’s when it started.’

‘So if your guys spoke to him in London...?’

‘Craig says he finished his job for the Americans and flew home. He dropped out of the group, but she stayed with it. He says she needed more and more thrills. Called her sick.’

‘And?’

Jeff frowned. ‘Craig says it’s more like a cult than a club—that my guys would never find it. Very exclusive. No white guys, no Asian guys, but girls of every colour of the rainbow—only dudes who are black. There’s supposed to be this big philosophy behind it that it “empowers” black men. The group thinks black men are the sexual supreme, and they have to learn how to dominate women as the first step to taking back family power and financial power. Whatever! He also said they’ve got money—lots of it.’

‘So this group is into something else,’ I said. ‘But they don’t like all the attention on their sexual games.’

I saw his face cloud, not understanding what I meant.

‘They staged a gunfight to offer the cops the farthest thing from sex play.’ I flipped back to one of the photos to make sure and then slid it back into the envelope. ‘Anna is wearing a choker in this shot, red silk with a diamond. When you claimed the body, you found ligature bruises on her neck, didn’t you?’

‘Y—yes.’

‘I’m sorry, Jeff,’ I offered. ‘She was into autoerotic asphyxiation, too. Had these bad guys given it a thought, they could have made it look like

she died accidentally while doing this to herself. But it's natural they try to come up with something 180 degrees away from kink—because *that's* where they feel vulnerable.'

'But she did die in the alley, Teresa. The cops and their forensic people know that much.'

'Yeah,' I said softly, nodding. 'Yeah, I know. I think sex got her in with whoever this was, but it might not be sex that was behind her murder. Can't be sure yet. I mean how could she offend these guys? What *are* their limits? Could be something else entirely that set them off.'

His eyes flashed me a warning. 'You're not suggesting she was a druggie? No way!'

'No, I'm not suggesting that. That's what they want everyone to think.'

'So you're sure it's a "they", too?'

'Don't look so surprised,' I told him. 'Listen, I think this drug deal alley business was a panic scenario, but it's still a conspiracy that was behind her death. To dig up this Hispanic guy who died with her took research. And I don't think one fellow alone could coerce Anna into an alley and then set up that dealer—all while making sure she didn't bolt! I can't be sure of the psychology, but if I have to make a guess, I think they're pretty smug with themselves right now. When the police found the kink stuff, they thought it was irrelevant. Police see drugs, they think drugs. So Anna's killers think they're in the clear. They want to taunt you. If they brag among themselves, it's a closed circle—no fun in that. They want someone else to know they got away with it.'

'They're wrong,' he said, his voice flat and dead.

I watched him pull out another drawer, and when his hand slapped down on the blotter there was a plastic click under his palm.

'Here. Corporate credit card in your name. There's a hefty limit on it, plenty for your expenses but don't go crazy, okay? I've already made a transfer into your account for payment. It should show up by the time you're back in the UK.'

He showed me the deposit slip, and I tried to keep my eyes from popping. Yeah, I'd be comfortable on this for a while. It almost made me feel guilty since I felt honour-bound to investigate Anna's death as her friend. But I had been cleaned out lately and wouldn't have been able to afford even a cheap flight to New York.

'Is there anything else you need to do the job?' he asked.

I pointed to his computer. 'You got broadband on that thing?'

'Of course.'

'Let me on it,' I said. 'You may want to get a cup of tea. You won't like the sites I have to look at.'

He said I was right and that he was going for a walk.



It didn't take long to find all kinds of links related to black BDSM. I couldn't even be sure that Jeff's information was good, and that this organisation was made up mostly of black people with maybe a few token white or Asian girls in the mix. He said it was exclusive, and if you want to stay exclusive, you don't keep a website. Just like the ultra-chic club that doesn't have a sign out front, everything word of mouth.

I Googled away because I needed to start research somewhere, and I also had to reassure my client that I would get cracking.

I wasn't terribly surprised at the number of black BDSM sites. Master Hines, Master Tain's, Master Vincent's, pansexual conferences, Ebony Doms and Panthers' Leather, Master Dred who'd create BDSM furniture for you, Sistas who ruled and plenty of chocolate that thundered. Sites for just looking at pics of sisters tied up like Black Girls Bound and Ebony Bondage. Then there's Dark Connections, which has historical overviews, personals, links, whatever you need. But all of this was surface skimming, a tourist view without a third dimension. Okay, remind yourself what you got so far.

The crime scene forensics, except for a couple of details, didn't matter. All the stuff about the crystal meth, how Anna was dressed, who the Hispanic guy was—that's all smokescreen, I told myself. Staged, just as Jeff insisted.

We know Anna liked getting tied up. We have hearsay chatter that she wanted more and more thrills. And the old marks on her throat suggest she was a gasper.

We know she and her boyfriend broke up. He went home to London. Anna stayed in New York with this group.

We can *infer* that Anna stumbled onto something big, something the group didn't want her to know. So they killed her and then staged her death scene.

We know somebody in that group is one smug bastard, wanting Jeff to know he got away with it.

And beyond that? We didn't know much else.

The truth was that my job couldn't really start until I was back home in London and interviewing Anna's boyfriend, Craig, for my own answers.

I also knew even then that this world, one where Anna got her kicks and which she must have completely understood, was one that baffled me, and I would need to infiltrate it nevertheless. I had witnessed and played in some weird fads, and all too recently I had been lying on the green felt of a poker table, making it while others watched. But I knew next to nothing about the BDSM world.

I knew that what they did they apparently called 'scenes', and all the 'Master' and 'Slave' talk from books and movies struck me as a bit silly. Hey, I think of myself as mostly straight, but there are certain girls I like, certain things I like. I sure as hell was never going to like what they call water sports (Ewwww!), and I couldn't understand pain. At least I didn't understand it yet.

It scared me to think I might.

It scared me to think I could possibly grow to like it, whether dishing it out, or worse, taking it.

But what I had never told anybody, what I had to admit to myself no matter how uncomfortable, was another insight I learned when I investigated the whole craze of strip poker games sweeping the posh set last year in London. Without going into details, I had what I call my 'revelation of rope'. I'd never been so vulnerable.

I came more times than I can count.

The truth. The truth is I have an exhibitionistic streak.

The truth is that I was ready for new revelations of vulnerability.



Breathe. I love how people say it to you like it's a conscious choice. It takes you a second to realize it can be in many contexts. Breathe to remind yourself you're living. Breathe to slow down. Breathe because you've stopped in panic, fear, surprise, whatever. So. Breathe. Focus on your breathing.

I had called Busaba and Keith to come out and play—our first transition from me as escort client to friend—and after showing me a couple

of the sights, they asked if I wanted to try practising meditation. ‘I bet you lead a plenty stressful life,’ Keith observed in a teasing voice. Well, not so much—only when rent is due or when people are trying to kill me. Okay, stop thinking and just breathe.

So here I was in Wat Matathat, an eighteenth-century temple that goes back even before the founding of Bangkok. Shaven-headed monks in their brilliant orange robes walked in a barefoot line through the compound, and the three of us sat cross-legged in front of a golden Buddha, trying to empty our minds. And I did my best to stop fidgeting.

I loved the informality of it. The faithful come and go as they please, no severely hard church pews, no images to inspire crushing guilt. When you think about it, the depiction of a smiling fellow, just sitting calmly and *thinking* (or not thinking too much if you want to get technical) has got to be one of the most sublime accessible images in world religion.

Stop thinking. Just breathe.

I felt Busaba’s tiny fingers push on my spine gently to correct my posture. A smile flickered on her lips, and then she was back to her own concentration. No rebuke in this quiet place, no holding on to regrets or problems. People told me they walk out and feel refreshed after they go to temple. Faintly, under his breath, I heard Keith a few feet away recite what I took for a Buddhist sutra (scripture) in Thai. I sat and relaxed, letting thoughts float in and out, and gradually I felt more alert, my peripheral vision opening up like curtains drawn on a picture window.

But more than this, feeling a wave of gratitude for this gift from my new friends. Here, have a little piece of serenity, just for a few minutes, in this beautiful place.

We walked out hand in hand, the three of us, and half an hour later as we stole into a narrow market street, empty of shoppers, Busaba suddenly turned and half knelt, her hands lifting my top and expertly pushing up one brassiere cup, her lips sucking my nipple. I felt Keith’s larger hand steal under the hem of my pants, digging down until he reached my core. Breathe. Oh, yes, breathe and breathe faster.



Three nights in Bangkok—into the third night. Jeff Lee took me out to a sumptuous Thai dinner in a place somewhere near... God, I don’t know, I can’t even pronounce the districts. I can get around Paris, London, Chicago, parts of Africa, but Bangkok baffled me. The restaurant

had a twenty-foot ceiling, and we had this postcard view of temple spires across the river.

I really appreciated sampling at last the local cuisine because the night before I was wolfing down a burrito in a Tex-Mex spot next to Patpong, which beat hands down the servings at the Texas Embassy off Trafalgar Square—who would have thought? Of course, back in London, you weren't likely to get served your burrito by a very tall and heavily rouged Thai transsexual. Tonight we sat around having another drink after our meal, and I realized I'd better clear the air over an ethical issue.

'Listen, Jeff,' I said. 'Are you paying me to find these guys so they can go to jail or for something else? You bring me into this, and I will not be there to paint the bulls-eye on someone. I've been used like that before, and I *don't* like it. Can we agree we're going to see them put in a cell?'

I could understand why he took a moment to consider. I waited.

'I'd be lying if I said I didn't want them to suffer and then kill 'em, Teresa. My second choice would be to have them in a *Thai* prison. People have no idea how horrible it is here if you mess up. I do this myself, I might never track them down, and I don't even know where to start.' He blew the air out of his lungs, frowned and then said, 'Okay.'

We shook on it.

His voice was calm, but his tone was almost pitiful. 'Please...'

'Don't worry,' I whispered.

He settled our bill, and then we walked for a bit through the streets.

'Jeff, there's something I don't get,' I said, thinking aloud. 'People move to different countries for love, they don't move for sex. What did she say when she told you she was staying for a while in New York? She must have told you something.'

'Not me,' he said bitterly. 'I found out later. She left a message for my parents on an answering machine. A message, not even a conversation with them! She said she was staying in America for a while and don't look for her. They couldn't believe this shit. Just out of the blue! Told you, Teresa. This is some kind of cult—'

He said something else but I missed it. All of a sudden the skies broke open.

There is nothing quite like a downpour in the Tropics. We were drenched within fifteen seconds as sheets of water poured down, and the narrow streets filled with lakes of accumulated rain. What strikes you is

how the water is *warm*. It's not the bone-chilling, miserable drip of English rain—it's a genuine hot shower. But it still was going to make a mess of my hair and—

Bullets wouldn't help it either.

Crack! Both of us had enough experience in trouble spots to recognise that sound. With a chivalrous hand, Jeff yanked my arm, and we both ran for cover. We heard another shot through the steady hard pattering of raindrops, and now I saw where the shots came from. The threat was two guys in a *tuk-tuk*, which gunned its engine and roared towards us. The Thai guy drove as a white dude fired. At Jeff. That much was clear.

Breathing hard now.

This. Is bad.

We ducked down an alley, and the creeps in the cart behind us overshoot. I had no idea where I was, of course, but Jeff must have known. In a moment, I saw we were trying to make for our own private *tuk-tuk* that had brought us down to the restaurant, and at thirty yards Jeff shouted something to his driver in panicked Thai. The poor fellow at the wheel looked at us completely bewildered and started the engine.

The guys after us were catching up, and I felt helpless, like a tiny figure in my brother's Hot Wheels cars from childhood, zinging along the narrow streets, hitting a main road and passing a palace, passing great mural portraits of Thai royal family members, and where were the cops? When I looked back, another shot slammed into the metal bar that held up the awning.

'Okay,' I whispered. 'We won't do that again.'

Car chases were fine for movies, but I was riding on what amounted to a rickshaw on a lawnmower with a thyroid condition.

Jeff had told me that most of the *tuk-tuk* drivers came from northern Thailand and they didn't have to have 'The Knowledge' like London cabbies—they didn't have to have any training at all. But Jeff considered having his own personal driver and *tuk-tuk* yet another 'business precaution'. We sloshed up a low hill, parting the rainwater like a motorboat, and came out on another main road.

Traffic jam. A sea of red tail lights in front of us. I thought we were in trouble until I spotted what looked like two police cruisers parked three cars up ahead—a fender-bender was helping to clog things further.

‘Come on!’ I yelled. ‘Let’s run like hell for them!’

Jeff tapped me frantically. ‘No, look!’

He barely noticed his driver was already hightailing it—not in the direction of the cops, mind you, but he was off.

‘Look!’ Jeff was still telling me.

The guys in the *tuk-tuk* chasing us must have spotted the cruisers as well. But now they were boxed in as cars filled in the alley behind them and alongside. My guess was they had stolen their vehicle anyway, and now they were abandoning it. The flashing cherry lights on the cruisers were scaring them off. They ran.

‘Go tell the cops,’ I told Jeff

‘Teresa! Where are you going?’

I paused all of two seconds to explain. ‘After them. They’ll disappear.’

‘Are you crazy, Teresa? First they’re chasing us, now you’re chasing them? They have *guns!*’

‘Yeah, but they’re looking forward.’

He was right. This was mad. If they heard me behind them, all they had to do was stop, turn and fire. I kinda stood out here. Let’s see, black woman on a street in Bangkok, and we only saw her a moment ago with our target—

I have this problem with planning ahead.

On the bright side, it had stopped raining.

‘Don’t follow me!’ I whined, because Jeff wasn’t moving to the police cruisers but loping twenty feet behind me.

Shit.

I ran to catch up to our assassins. I thought I had seen them splitting up, but I couldn’t be sure. Not being a complete fool, I focussed on the Thai guy, since he’d been the driver not the shooter. He was already slowing down from a jog to a natural walk, not wanting to draw attention. He didn’t seem aware of me at all. But where was his partner?

Into another side street with signs I couldn’t understand, more Thai massage parlours, a closed amulet shop, a launderette—and now my quarry had disappeared.

As I rounded the corner, still waving at Jeff not to follow me but to get to safety, the big fat shin of this meaty leg flew up and *walloped* me right in the shoulder.

Ow. Huge ow. I staggered to my knees, and I actually had tears of pain in my eyes because that bloody well hurt. And another was flying towards my head.

If I hadn't ducked, I'm sure a blood vessel would have burst inside my brain from the impact, and I'd be dead. I *hate* guys who know Muay Thai. And here I was in Thailand, the country that invented it. Terrific. I'm fighting a guy who knows a martial art where fanatics toughen their shins by swinging them against tree trunks.

I was trained in karate so instead of roundhouses, I was better at front snap kicks and proper straight punches. And now since I was down on my knees, I sent a lovely one into his balls, just to teach him not to try that again.

A flurry of elbows came at my face when we re-engaged, and it was block, block, block, block until I nailed him square in the chest. I heard his wind go, and then I popped him in the sweet spot just below the nose. But it wasn't over. One, two, three, and as he fell on his ass, he reached into his jacket, and it was the first time I had met anyone who wore one of those cliché shoulder holsters for pistols.

I thought only his partner had a gun.

Wrong.

A 9 mm Glock was in my face, and *yes*, of course, I didn't know what it was at the time, I know very little about guns, except that I knew I certainly didn't like the idea of being shot by one, and my heart was racing too fast, and I was thinking too fast, and the gun hovered, and I decided it was an appropriate time to panic. Yes. Now would be good.

Adrenaline is wonderful. It makes you do amazing stunts like swing out your foot and bat a loaded pistol out of a guy's grip, making it clatter on the ground six feet away. This would have looked really fearless and cool, no doubt, if I hadn't emitted a cowardly, feminine yelp, something like the reaction you have when you see a huge spider in your kitchen. 'Aaahhh!' Right before I did it. You get the idea.

That was when the *really* strange stuff began to happen. Behind me, Ah Jo Lee was doing the hundred-metre dash for his life with the white guy behind him, our second assailant. Tall with dark brown hair and a dimpled chin and glowering eyes. Bad suit.

I had told Jeff to go to the cops, get to safety, because I assumed both assassins were running now that they'd blown their chance. Wrong again.

The white guy had obviously doubled-backed down another street or something while I went chasing after Mr Kickboxer here. It was a stupid mistake, but as a 'consultant' in this line of work, I was a one-woman band forced to make split decisions on my limited resources. Now my client was running for his life again, and the second bad guy...

I watched him look straight past Jeff at his partner and fire.

He shot the Thai guy dead in front of us.

I had all of a few seconds to scoop up the gun on the ground and do something with it, because now he was back to aiming at Jeff and the ugly object in my hand exploded and bucked with its recoil.

Bad Suit let out a roar like a bear. Goes to show my proficiency with firearms. I'd been aiming at his chest. I hit him in the bicep. The wound made him drop his gun, and still in shock like Jeff, I took a step forward, trying to make the Glock barrel stop shaking.

'*What the hell's going on?*' I yelled. 'Who are you and why are you trying to kill my friend?'

'Fuck you!' he said.

Charming. And too little to tell where he was from. At least I knew he spoke English.

He had shot his partner. He had shot his partner instead of Jeff first because Kickboxer was on the ground, easy to shoot. If he shoots Jeff in the back, he can't dummy up another drug-buy-gone-bad scenario like in New York—

'Jesus, kill this guy,' said Jeff, panting hard.

'Yeah, sure, Jeff.'

'I mean it, Teresa, I can't afford this kind of profile.'

'I am *not* going to kill this guy for you, Jeff! Are you mad? We'll call the police and sort it. It's not like you've done anything—'

'Teresa, this isn't London—'

'Jeff, he might have answers for you!'

'Creeps like this never do!' he shouted back.

He was right.

'Hey, hey, *hey!*' I said with increasing force, because Bad Suit had pulled something out of his jacket with his good arm. He knew by now that I wasn't going to shoot him so he went about his business, quickly and efficiently, and Jeff and I were both mesmerized. We didn't understand at all what he was trying to do, but I think we both suspected it was

suicidal. He looped these cords around his ankles, and a long rope led to a collar that he snapped around his neck—

‘Stop!’ I yelled. ‘Stop!’

Jeff moved first. His hand gripped the cord, trying to keep the tension out of it because we couldn’t understand the mechanism but it looked like he was going to choke himself. It was utterly surreal. Didn’t he know we wouldn’t give him that kind of time?

The collar was tightening around his neck.

Jeff and the guy were wrestling now, the assassin no longer interested in killing him, only himself.

He clumsily shoved Jeff away and then fell on the sidewalk, and I watched his legs straighten. We heard this hideous *snap*—the most horrible, haunting sound. The guy’s eyes popped, his mouth went slack, and blood cascaded over the collar, leaked under it—

‘Oh, my God,’ I whispered.

There were some kind of grotesque studs, barbs on the *inside* of the collar. When he pulled the cord taut with his legs, he had sent them shooting out, and they had cut his carotid artery. He was dead within seconds.

He had killed his partner to prevent him from being defeated and captured. He had killed himself when he was beaten.

Fanatics.

Jeff insisted we get out of there as fast as possible, and we trudged back to our vehicle. He drove. As the little engine whined along, I thought of the killer fetishist who made his collar into a bear trap.



Jeff was convinced that his attackers had nothing to do with any of his enterprises.

They must have been sent, he argued, after he had dispatched his own men to interview Anna’s boyfriend, Craig, in London. Someone must have been keeping an eye on Craig Padmore to make sure he didn’t raise a stink over Anna’s death, and when Jeff’s henchmen showed up, they had traced them back to Bangkok. ‘Whoever killed Anna doesn’t want me solving her murder,’ he insisted.

‘Then why send the photos to taunt you?’ I asked. ‘They didn’t have to tip you off that someone else was involved. They could have kept their mouths shut and let you think the worst about her—that she was a drug

addict. Why send the photos at all? It's almost like the killer changed his mind.'

He wasn't interested. To him, it made sense: look, we got away with it, but don't try coming after us. I wasn't so sure.

This was his city, and he had contacts within the Bangkok police who confirmed that the Thai killer had been a rent-a-thug, strictly freelance. The white guy, Mr Bad Suit, was an unknown. INTERPOL didn't have his prints and neither, it seemed, did any American or British database. Unless you were in the system, you didn't track. It could take months or years before somebody identified him.

I suggested I hang around a few more days, but Jeff said no. 'I can get bodyguards, Teresa. Please! Do the job I'm paying you for!' Then he apologised for being so abrupt. 'Anna... She never did anything to anybody.'

'I know.'

'Hurt them for me.'