

[This chapter originally provided a transition between Matt's deal with Talbot and his midnight conversation with Savannah in Arunothai, Thailand. It was cut to save word count. Some of the content moved to the following chapter.]

Chapter 43

10 DAYS LEFT

Savannah says, "Are we hiding out?"

I check to see if she's serious. The set of her mouth says she is. She's driving our pewter right-hand-drive Toyota Hilux (what we call a Tacoma pickup truck back home), concentrating on the road probably more than necessary given how sparse the traffic is. "Why do you ask?"

We're heading roughly north on Highway 107 in Chiang Mai province in northwestern Thailand. That's not a sentence I ever expected to say up until a couple days ago. The road surface isn't any worse than most in L.A. and is better than some. I'd expected endless jungle, but so far, only a few stretches of road haven't been lined with homes, businesses, or farms.

Savannah glances at me. Her eyes are cooler than I'm used to. "Let's see. The DEA arrested Jim and Lorena. Then they arrested Chad and Brandon and the other collectors. I don't hear from you for two weeks, then you call and say, 'Hey, want to go to Thailand... *tomorrow?*'" Not quite—I called Friday afternoon and asked if she wanted to go on Sunday. "I get it if we are. I don't want to go to jail."

"Have you done anything you should go to jail for?"

"Who hasn't?"

Some of us more than others.

We're passing through a town. I don't know what it's called—there's not much English-language signage here, unlike back in Chiang Mai. There are lots of open-air shops; I guess air conditioning isn't a big thing here, even though it's 93 degrees and something close to seventy percent humidity outside our climate-controlled bubble. Savannah had wanted to leave the windows open

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so we'd get used to the outside weather, but I put my foot down and said that the person who pays for the wheels gets to decide whether we use the A/C.

She slows and turns left at a 7-Eleven. It looks just like the ones back home except for the posters in the windows. There's condensation on the glass. "Where are we going?"

"I want to show you something fun. I also need to get out and walk around a little."

"Are you okay to drive?"

"I'm fine. I just... it's the middle of the night back home and I want to stretch my legs."

We spent twenty hours in transit from LAX to Bangkok, including a short layover in Hong Kong. Cathay Pacific's business class was really nice, but that's a long damn time to be locked up in an airplane. We crashed (not literally) at the airport Novotel, then made the hour-plus flight from Bangkok to Chiang Mai just after lunch today. It's a fourteen-hour time difference between here and home. I'm pretty sure I know what month it is, but that's as close as I can guess the time.

We roll into a park-like fenced enclave. Savannah steers us onto a road heading straight for a white stupa.

I ask, "What's with all the chickens?" The road's flanked with dozens of plaster or plastic chickens, mostly black with red heads.

"They're fighting cocks. This stupa's dedicated to King Naruesan. Back in the sixteenth century, this area—Ayutthaya—was a Burmese colony. Naruesan was a hostage to make sure the puppet king behaved. Anyway, he bet Ayutthaya's freedom on a cockfight and won." She waves out the windshield. "People bring them here as offerings."

The stupa looks like a white, thirty-foot-tall hand-bell on top of an octagonal base surrounded by a round landscaped plot and a circular drive. We park next to a small, muddy lake and a sprinkling of mismatched patio tables. Savannah ties a black bandana around her head, then slips on a broad-brimmed straw fedora. She gives me a you-poor-bastard look. "You're going to fry."

"Thanks."

Getting out of the truck is like stepping into a bathtub of boiling water. It gets hot in L.A., but we deal unless the humidity gets above, say, thirty percent. This is like the sauna from Hell.

Savannah buys a couple Cokes from the open-air snack booth next to the lake. Between working at Parsons and at the gallery, I can recognize most of the major Western languages or language groups. When Savannah speaks Thai, I can't even tell where the words start or end.

We drink as we stroll across the street and past a pair of four-foot-tall roosters to the stupa. My tee is already soaked and I can barely stand the heat in my khaki board shorts. Savannah's draped in a calf-length shirtdress the color of dusty green olives but doesn't seem to be sweating at all.

She leads me around the stupa's base and tells me about the reliefs carved into what looks like red sandstone panels. They're the graphic-novel version of the adventures of King Naruesan, the Simon Bolivar of Ayutthaya. Once we get back to where we started, she says, "Why did you ask me to come with you? You could've hired someone local. They would've been cheaper."

"I didn't want a local. I wanted you."

"Why?"

The longer our relationship has gone on, the guiltier I feel about manipulating her. It would've been a lot easier if we'd simply stayed boss and contractor. But that's not how it went, and now I have to come up with a way to do what I need to without hurting her any more than necessary. I can start by being nicer to her than I have been over the past couple weeks. "I've just jumped into a place that's like another planet to me. The last thing I want to do is try to deal with a stranger. I want to be with somebody I know and I like." I can't bring myself to say *trust*, and I'm not sure she'd buy it anyway. "I can't think of anybody I'd rather have here with me."

Her eyes thaw a bit. "Let's get out of the sun before you melt."

We settle onto one of those round concrete tables with three curving benches around it, like you find at McDonalds. Some ducks are splashing in the pond. Savannah sets her hat on the table. "If you want me to be with you here because you like me, why are you paying me? I feel a little like... well, I'm getting a mixed message. Am I here as your advisor or your girlfriend?"

"Is there some reason you can't be both? Look, I want you here as my girlfriend. But I'm also going to be relying on your expertise, and that's work for you, so you should be compensated. I mean, your time's valuable, that's what you sell. I don't want you feeling

used when I ask you to do work. I kind of did that over Memorial Day and I've felt bad about it since." Not completely bullshit, by the way. "Just take the money. It'll pay you back for those times we were together and I made you work and didn't pay you for it."

She pinches the front of her dress and flaps it to get some air movement. Her dress has at least a dozen buttons down the front; the top three and bottom three are undone, but she's still gotta be hot under there. "I'll think about it. I'm still considering quitting as your advisor so we don't have these problems. To be perfectly honest? I feel a little weird about you paying me when we're sleeping together."

"I do too. I'm just trying to be fair." I finish off my Coke. "Would you like me to drive?"

"There's another police checkpoint a few miles up the road. Think you can deal with them?" I shake my head. At the last one, she paid off the cop with two hundred baht—about two bucks—and got us out of an "inspection." "I don't think you can, either. I'm fine, I'll drive today. You can do it tomorrow."

We drive through stretches of countryside separating sprawling villages. We pass temples with elaborate gables, stupas that look like lamp finials made by Claes Oldenberg, open-air stores, and houses half-hidden by lush foliage. I see a lot of corrugated-metal roofs painted a vivid blue, front-yard shrines, scooters and motorcycles, and lounging yellow dogs. The radio is full of talking heads and a little Thai pop music, which sounds a lot like pop music everywhere. Savannah points out things she thinks are interesting but otherwise doesn't talk much. When I give her thigh a squeeze, she smiles at me and strokes my hand, so I guess I'm not completely in the doghouse.

I say, "Why isn't it raining? I thought this is monsoon season."

"Monsoon doesn't work that way. It rains more and harder, but not all the time. Don't worry—we'll get wet soon enough."

Finally, after what seems like an eternity on the road but is only a shade more than two and a half hours, we pass a small black-on-white road sign outside an official-looking building: Ban Arunotai. A few yards later, we go under an arch that looks like what you might find at the edge of an American Chinatown, except that it's powder blue and has red Thai writing on the main span.

Savannah says, “We’re here.” She points off to our right. “Those mountains over there? They’re in Myanmar.”

And soon enough, we will be, too.



We eat an early dinner at the Tayong Yunnan Noodle Restaurant, which has 140 mostly positive reviews on Google. The menu is a series of signs on the walls with pictures and lots of Chinese text. Savannah orders for us. We perch on red-plastic stools on the sidewalk with a number of other customers—mostly locals, it seems—and watch the sunset do spectacular things with the clouds gathering above us.

I say, “These people don’t look like Thais.”

Savannah nods. “They’re not. Most of them are Chinese, mostly from Yunnan. Back when the Nationalists lost the revolution and moved to Taiwan, part of the Chinese Army was stuck down here. These are their kids and grandkids.”

After dinner, we pick up a (refrigerated) sixer of Phuket lager at the (air conditioned) So Good Super Mart across the street (a 7-Eleven by any other name) and return to our hotel. It’s a smallish place with a front office and common room, three bungalows, and two long buildings with multiple rooms. We’re in one of the long buildings in a room that’s both spotless and surprisingly large, but has no A/C.

Savannah kicks off her river sandals, unbuttons her dress halfway down, then pushes it off her shoulders. I’d already figured out she was braless, but didn’t realize she’d gone commando. She squints at me with that look people get when they’re over-tired. “I’m going to rinse off in the shower. You’re welcome to join me, but all I have energy for is soap.”

“Same here. I’ll catch you if you fall asleep.”