

# 1

## RE-ACQUAINTANCE BY ACCIDENT

A woman on a motorcycle sped over the Meng Rai Bridge on the Ping River. The traffic light was green, but in Thailand's Chiang Mai this was often merely an invitation to negotiate with drivers running red lights. A Toyota sedan clipped the bike, spinning it and throwing the rider several metres. Victor Cavalier, on his early-morning jog, was about to cross the bridge. At the squeal of brakes, he turned to see the woman hit the ground. He smelled the burning rubber from hard-braking vehicles as he dodged the traffic and reached her.

The woman lay motionless and crumpled in the middle of the road. He eased off her helmet, and felt her pulses at neck and wrist. He called in Thai for someone to phone for an ambulance. Then Cavalier noticed a tattoo, poking through the torn back of her dress. It was a phoenix, and seemed familiar. He mentally pushed it aside and concentrated on the stricken woman's condition.

'The hospital is on the Chang Klan Road,' he said, pointing, in Thai to the young male driver of the offending vehicle. His voice was calm and authoritative. 'Move fast!'

The driver stood frozen, either dumbfounded or in two minds about doing a runner. Seeing his hesitation, a female on a motorcycle volunteered to fetch an ambulance. In the fifteen minutes it took to arrive, the young victim stirred, opened her eyes and tried to sit up.

‘Serena ...’ she mumbled, ‘Serena ... is she okay?’

Cavalier looked around. A doll was lying on the ground a few metres away, its legs crushed. Mud was smeared on its face and head.

‘She’ll survive,’ he said softly. The woman looked dazed. He wiped blood from her nose. Then he recognised her.

‘Pin!’ he said in surprise, ‘it’s you!’

‘Victor!’ she cried, scrutinising him.

They had first met four years earlier when she was a medical student in Chiang Mai. She was funding her studies by working for a tour company, and she had driven him to the notorious Golden Triangle, in Thailand’s north-eastern corner.

‘I can’t believe it’s you,’ Pin said. Still confused, she looked about and asked, ‘What happened?’ She grimaced and flexed her shoulder.

The ambulance took her the few kilometres to the hospital, where a wheelchair was waiting. Paramedics placed her in it. Cavalier pushed her into an emergency room.

‘This is crazy!’ she said. ‘This is my hospital. I work here.’

‘Not today,’ Cavalier said gently.

‘I have patients to see.’ Pin looked up at him, aggrieved.

‘You were unconscious when I reached you,’ he said. ‘Better let a colleague examine you.’

‘Never! They are all quacks!’

Cavalier couldn't help smiling, unsure if she was joking or not.

'My bike!' she cried.

'I'll get it,' he said.

'My baby!'

Cavalier was startled. Had a child been thrown clear? he wondered for a second.

'My Serena!' she said. 'My doll!'

He was driven by tuktuk back to the bike on the side of the road, where it had ended up after the hit. The rear fender was dented. The key was still in the ignition. He started it, all the while looking for the doll. He spotted it off the road and retrieved it. Satisfied the bike was rideable, he drove it to the hospital, gave the doll to a nurse and waited an hour for Pin to be examined.

She came to him with a bandage across her nose and face. Her left shoulder was also strapped. She clutched her doll, its crushed legs dangling by threads.

'They think I have mild concussion,' she said, with a roll of the eyes. 'My shoulder has a bit of bruising, but I'm fine. I'll take the day off. Back here at work tomorrow.'

'I'll book you a taxi.'

'Thanks for saving Serena,' she said, hugging the doll. 'Sorry you have to see us like this.'

'You're still easily the most beautiful woman in Thailand.'

'What about my Serena?'

'She ... she has some interesting features,' he said, glancing at the big-eyed doll, with its scrawny hair and a lifelike look that he found eerie.

'*Interesting?* She is very beautiful and special.'

Cavalier scrutinised Pin and wondered if she was serious.

‘A doll is a doll,’ he shrugged.

‘Not dolls like Serena. They are important in the Thai culture.’

‘Important in what way?’

‘They have been blessed with special powers.’

‘Blessed?’

‘By certain monks.’

Cavalier remembered, vaguely, reading a feature article about this strange, centuries-old belief, which he considered was superstition. He decided not to pursue the discussion.

‘You haven’t changed,’ she said.

‘Nor have you, *Miss Thailand University*.’

‘Sweet mouth!’

‘You *have* changed in some way ...’ he said, looking closely at her features.

‘I have to appear professional.’ She chuckled. ‘I even have to advise young couples on their sex lives. My hair was blonde. I’ve gone back to my natural colour, and it’s shorter.’

‘You still have that tattoo ...’

‘Oh, you noticed ...’ She paused. ‘I must hide it under my clothes as much as possible. It’s a bit risqué for my patients, not to mention my rather stiff fellow medicos.’

She touched his nose.

‘You are even better looking than before. Fuller in the face. But what happened to your nose? It was like a Thai’s with a bump in it.’

‘I’ve broken it a few times.’

‘Not that stupid game you love so much?’

‘Once from that, yes,’ he said. After hesitating, he asked, ‘Would you have dinner with me?’

'Too busy at the moment, sorry.'

Cavalier tilted his head, wanting an explanation.

'Look,' she said, observing his reaction, 'I've had some issues recently. I'm working through them. I had a bad relationship with my very bad ex-husband.'

'Do you want to tell me about it?'

'No. Maybe later.'

Cavalier shook hands with her.

'I'll call you,' he said, patting the doll on the head.