

## Chapter 2: *A bombing in Paradise*

The Bay of Pattaya sparkled under the moonlight, the waters just metres away from where Tan and Chie Shin sat eating *tom ung gung*, a spicy prawn soup with Chicken Rama at the Siam Star in Pattaya. Tan clasped his new wife's soft hand and they smiled in delight. A haunting Chinese love song added to the magic as the ocean haze that had begun to appear at sunset cast a spell over the bay that could go on forever. The honeymooners from Singapore, together for only three months prior to their wedding in Hong Kong, were happy, relaxed and looking forward to a boat cruise in the morning. Now into the second course with a serving of *Kai jiew moo*, a delicious omelette with pork and fish sauce, they smiled and chatted happily together. In no hurry, the couple toasted over a glass of velvety Vietnamese wine and in whispered tones they made secret plans for a thousand tomorrows...

Then, as their crystal glasses clinked together once more, a bulky object sailed over their heads like some stray postal parcel. Within seconds, a detonation caused a massive pressure spike of thermal air and gas, indiscriminately blasting bodies and debris at 600 feet per second; atomising everything in the direct impact of the bomb and reverberating outwards resulting in disastrous and complete devastation of the Siam Star.

After just a microsecond's delay, the roar of the blast was heard as the ear-bursting explosion demolished the restaurant's structure from the roof to the support beams, sending the ceiling crashing down as though swept aside by the hand of a vengeful ghost.

Bodies and debris lay strewn everywhere over what had, an instant before, been the perfect setting for romance. Now, survivors were faced with a life-changing reality. Only after the lingering white fog of plaster particles and the red mist of destroyed blood vessels cleared was the full extent of the carnage clear. The moans and cries for help were appalling to the horrified onlookers just beginning to gather at the fringes of the bomb site. Added to the din was the wail of sirens from approaching ambulances and emergency services amid numerous beeping horns as night traffic started to build and overflow like an uncorked bottle into Beach Road.

Ripped flesh and shredded clothing hung off men and women who staggered in shock through choking asbestos dust and lurched aimlessly around the dead and the dying. Bodies—both dead and alive—had been thrown everywhere. Most had missing arms, legs or both, and open wounds bled out like human fire hydrants.

The dead and maimed lay about in twisted, gruesome poses. One man lay with his leg facing the wrong way, his lifeless eyes staring into nothingness. Another man, still alive, held onto his bleeding stump—the rest of his limb nowhere in sight. A trail of blood marked his progress as he dragged himself across the floor.

With nothing to be done for the dead and with most of the couples, including Tan and Chie Shin, dying together, the walking wounded staggered about in search of help. A stout, matronly woman with mangled arms and no lower body wailed in Thai, '*Phi Tai Hong*' then in English, 'Vengeful ghosts do this. It is a curse. They have power we not have.'

Her high frequency wail dropped an octave then faded to a hoarse whisper as she quickly weakened, her cries coming out once more in Thai, then deteriorating into gibberish as she gently rubbed what had once been a fully intact stomach but was now crudely split open like a bag of squid. Her bleeding innards formed a tributary that flowed south to pool with the blood gushing from legless stumps. Lifeblood was

still being pumped out by a heart not yet done. She struggled to keep herself upright in a makeshift seated position, as if fighting the battle against unconsciousness could prevent her inevitable death.

Propped up against part of an upturned table covered in a pile of mangled and charred debris, she mumbled, drifting between Thai, English and other tongues, probably known only to her.

Her now thin tone could still be heard in a strange silence that had descended on the area immediately following the deafening explosion. She said again in English, following sharply inflected Thai words, 'Vengeful ghosts, they come for us. They will kill us all.'

Those who managed to escape from the hellish aftermath of the explosion would likely spend the rest of their lives wondering what happened, replaying the events over, and over again. As one voice faded to its merciful end, so another replaced it. An elderly Thai woman bleeding heavily from the forehead called out in Thai with a loud voice that defied her broken body.

'Where is my son? Where is my son?' The sharp intonation of her words sounded as though she was shouting at demons. But no matter how much or how loudly she shouted, her son failed to materialise, and the truth became clear. Her shouts turned to cries of agony. She too was doomed, haunted.

Perhaps realising there wasn't much time she dug into her handbag—the dark leather now white from dust—and pulled out a photo of the son she had just lost. With bloodied, torn fingers she held his picture close to her chest and wailed, 'I am coming to join you, *Phi*. It will not be long.' She kissed the torn photo then a gust of wind tore it from her weakened grasp. Speaking in Thai and then English as the other woman had done, she said, 'My son is *Phi Tai Hong*, a ghost who shall haunt his killers for his monstrous death.' And with the last of her energy depleted from the final cry of a wounded heart, she collapsed as her soul reunited with the son she could not live without.

As the wail of sirens approached, the walking wounded united with outsiders. Anyone who was able attempted to assist victims emerge from the ruins of the building or carry those who couldn't move on their own. One man attempted to help a middle-aged European woman with a twisted posture akin to a broken doll but her painful cry seemed a warning that this could well have been the wrong move: 'My legs, I can't move my legs!'

In the middle the blast zone, a man could be seen lying prone on a bed of jagged glass and debris, staring at what was left of his legs and arms. Silent and in shock, he had no words for the unspeakable. He lay back and folded his arms across his chest as though waiting to die.

Nearby, a young Thai woman sat on the kerb, shards of glass protruding from her gut like translucent daggers. Looking down, her face a mask of horror, one bloodied hand grasped a shard but as she tried to pull it free she screamed in agony. Her head slumped, and she let go of the offending protrusion that she now realised couldn't be removed without surgery. The woman raised her bleeding clasped hands in a *wai*, or a show of respect, towards a remarkably intact bronze Buddha, still sitting with a beatific smile over the wreckage as though he was one of the few survivors. The statue's devotee would not be among them. The nameless young lady, alone and broken, knew death was circling like an evil crow about to land on a human perch. She seemed to be praying for mercy, for grace, that final grace. Speaking softly in Thai to herself and to dearly beloved Buddha, she slowly fell over on her side, eyes staring lifelessly at the ruins that had taken her life. A man hurried over and pushed her eyelids down to let her soul rest.

This would keep her soul from wandering forever. Her ghost, *Phi Tai Hong*, the ghost of a person that suffered a sudden violent or cruel death, would curse this place until her murder was avenged.

Like radiation after a nuclear event, the toxic blowback promised to bring even more damage than the initial blast. Acrid smells of cordite and dust filled the air evoking violent coughing and choking, possible precursors for lung damage and worse. One young girl, possibly American going by the accent, stood with her hands on her knees coughing up blood between hoarse cries of, 'Help me, somebody help me.' Otherwise unmarked, her prognosis was uncertain as trickles of blood from her mouth segued into a vomitus flow.

Then came sounds of rescue. The eerie silence that had descended after the ear-shattering detonation was replaced by the blaring, urgent sounds of sirens, coming in unrelentingly like a tsunami of sound waves following an earthquake. This aftershock was enough to give aural hallucinations to the many with shattered eardrums. Already they were bombarded with a dull roar endlessly replaying inside their heads like wild surf crashing onto a beach. This noise was now being pierced by a repeated volley of oscillating sirens signalling the arrival of the emergency services. For most of the diners however, it was too late. The Singaporean honeymooners appeared almost unscathed if observed from a certain angle. But they lay silent and unmoving. Forever together in a final, heartbreaking embrace. They would become the night and the stars. Was there a special kind of heaven for doomed lovers like Tan and Chie Shin, or would their souls, too, become vengeful ghosts demanding justice, as told by a prophet now deceased?

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This micro-world, this small facet of the glittering jewel of a twilight Pattaya, was changed forever.

Po Hmu watched and felt relief at the successful explosion. The relief washed away the tension and replaced it with elation, with joy.