

Fah

Bangkok, Thailand

The twenty-year-old girl pulled the needle out from her forearm, leaning her head back as a sigh of ecstasy escaped from her chapped red lips, her face slathered with layers of make up like old plaster. Above her, the glow of a twenty-watt bulb cast a dim light on her surroundings—a soiled mattress, open suitcase of clothes, littered tubes of make up spilling out from a purse, a collection of old high heels, and a bag of needles on the dressing table beside her.

“For your first time, they’ll pay more than they usually do,” she said matter-of-factly, reaching for her handbag and pulling out a lighter and a pack of Marlboro Lights. “You’re young—what, seventeen?—and your skin is nice and white, rare for a country girl. They’ll like that.” She lit up a cigarette, the flame briefly flaring up with life, reflecting off her metallic eye shadow. “Sixty percent of the money goes to Auntie for taking care of us. I get twenty-five for finding you, and you get fifteen.” Smoke curled up in strange, ethereal formations, dancing with the dust motes in the gloomy light.

“How...” The younger girl cleared her throat. “How much?”

“Depends. Sometimes ten-thousand baht.”

Ten-thousand baht! How many bags of rice would her family have to sell for that kind of money back home? “What kind of massage do I have to do?”

The older one—Prim—let out a hoarse bark of laughter. “You’re funny,” she giggled, blowing out a long stream of smoke. “What’s your name again?”

“Fah,” the younger girl replied.

“Fah,” Prim echoed slowly, tasting the word on her tongue. “Like blue, or like sky?”

“Sky.”

Prim’s eyes studied the teenager before her, who became uncomfortably aware of herself. Fah tried to ignore her reflection in the dressing table mirror from behind Prim—it stared back with wide black eyes matching the dark tresses that fell around small shoulders, mouth turned downward in a full, pink pout.

“Hm.” Prim pursed her lips. “Maybe too plain—might have to change it up a bit. We want you virginal but also erotic. Maybe *Daeng* will be better—red sells in this market.”

Fah nodded uncertainly, turning over the new name in her head. “So...what do I have to do?” she repeated hesitantly.

Prim took another drag, her lipstick tainting the cigarette with red stains. “Make him happy.”

“How?” Her eyes betrayed her curiosity.

“You’ll see.” Prim smiled, and Fah stared at the crumbling mascara on her dark lashes. “It will come naturally to you.”

Fah sat inside the glass room on a raised platform carpeted in plush red cloth. She felt caged by the intoxicating scent of perfume, and the harsh pink light made it hard to see.

“Come on, child. Don’t be scared.” Auntie smiled, revealing teeth stained black by years of chewing betel nut. Fah stood up, legs shaking, and followed her out. Her head spun, stars bursting before her eyes as they adjusted to the darkness outside the room, revealing an awaiting middle-aged man. His balding head shone like a greasy polished egg, his double chin melding his pudgy face onto his shoulders at the expense of a discernable neck. His bloated stomach pushed the gray policeman’s uniform out so that it bulged uncomfortably. Though his friendly smile made him look like a Laughing Buddha statue, his eyes—little black pebbles—surveyed the dozens of scantily clad young girls behind the glass.

“Here she is,” Auntie proclaimed to the man as they neared. “Isn’t she lovely?”

The woman ushered her forward, her skeletal fingers prodding her into the arms of the stranger. Fah winced, stiffening as he clasped his pudgy limbs around her. She felt his body quivering, emanating a sour stench that attacked her nostrils.

“I’ve never seen such pale skin in this place before,” the man wheezed, his voice higher than she was expecting. The pebbly eyes fed on her body, taking her in, and a slimy tongue shot out to wet his dry lips. “She’s a little Lolita!”

Auntie beamed. “Take her upstairs whenever you’re ready.”

Fah squeezed her eyes shut, forcing herself from feeling the pain by escaping somewhere far away. She tried to ignore each desperate, impaling thrust, and as beads of sweat fell on to her naked body, she envisioned droplets of fresh rain. In her mind, endless viridescent rice paddies stretched out to the horizon. When she could no longer take it, she thought back to Mekk.

“Isn’t the sky beautiful?” she sighed to him, admiring his boyish grin—as white as the clouds that were his namesake—dazzling against the tanned darkness of his skin.

“Yes.” He feigned confusion as he clarified, “Wait, which fah are we talking about? The sky, or you?” She suppressed the smile playing on her lips, shaking her head and feeling the country air running free through her hair.

The current scent of rancid sweat filling her nostrils was replaced by cowpat and dewy grass, and the damp sheets sticking to her skin disappeared, substituted by the moist morning air covering the world in a lethargic blanket.

“Here,” Mekk said, handing to her a string of braided straw, knotted together to form a ring.

The sour breath exhaled on to her body was a cool breeze sweeping across the landscape, piercing the sluggish atmosphere.

“One day,” Mekk promised.

“It’s not right,” Fah whimpered, forcing her lips from trembling. Her hands bundled into fists, curling up against the dirtied towel wrapped around her body. Even after an hour of scrubbing her skin raw in the shower, she could still smell the nameless man—feel his body collapsed on top of hers.

“Hm?” Auntie’s eyes barely flickered up from the cash register.

“He...I didn’t know...” She took a deep, quivering breath. “He was a policeman...”

“What?” The older woman finally met her gaze. her pockmarked face expressionless.

“He forced me—”

“No,” Auntie corrected. “You were paid for your services. It was a fair deal.” She turned back to the banknotes in her hands, counting them with great speed and precision.

“I said no.”

An irritated sigh. “Doesn’t matter. He paid, he receives.”

“But”—she grabbed the older woman’s arm, her knuckles white, nails biting into the wrinkled flesh—“*do something.*”

Auntie tore herself from the young girl; a sharp sound resonated around the room. “What do you expect me to do, hm?” she spat. “Charge a man? For what?”

The girl ignored the welt forming on the fair skin of her cheek. She couldn’t even utter the word.

“You took the money.” Auntie’s eyes were ablaze, the red light reflecting off her dark pupils, making them dance. “That makes you a whore. You’re one of us now.”

Fah watched as the woman took a few seconds to calm down before turning back to the cash register once more.

A minute passed by in silence. Fah felt the desperation bubbling inside her chest, welling up and threatening to explode. She didn’t know what to say, or where to even begin. Finally, she managed to string together a few tremulous words. “I’ll report him,” she whispered.

Auntie scoffed. "Go ahead, say that a policeman stole from you."

Fah furrowed her eyebrows. *Stole? Does she think I'm angry because he didn't give me enough money?*

Auntie slammed the cash register's drawer shut. "Do you think his buddies will do anything? They see you as vermin now." She shrugged dismissively. "After all, if you rape a hooker, is it really stealing?"

Fah awoke to the rhythmic thudding sounds of a couple in the room above. It took her a few moments before she remembered what had happened, and as soon as she did, shame washed through her body, as red as the lights around the district. She pulled the musty blanket tighter around her—still feeling the salty paths the tears had left on her cheeks.

The smells and sounds from the streets of the buzzing urban hive outside wafted through the open window—durians, sewage, sweat...motorcycles buzzing past, the sharp blare of *tuk-tuks*, the shuffle of tourists squeezing through narrow *sois*, itching to get their dose of authentic Thai culture.

She drifted in and out of consciousness, wanting to escape through sleep but afraid she would dream of the assault. Eventually, a knock on the door roused her out of the state of mental limbo.

"Fah?"

She ignored the sound. Maybe it would go away.

"Fah..."

She cracked open an eye glued shut with dried tears, wiping away the crusty stains as Prim entered the room and approached the mattress, settling herself down on the thin material.

"There's no point to crying and feeling sorry for yourself." Prim's voice was a soft, barely audible whisper. "You can't go home. Your family...they won't understand. You might think you're ruined, but you're not," she reassured, her raspy voice surprisingly soothing. "You can still help your family. You have your chance now." The older girl placed a cool hand on her shoulder. "You can make the money and send it back home, and maybe along the way find a rich client who will take you as his wife."

Fah forced herself from shuddering—the thought alone of another man touching her made her want to throw up.

Prim brushed a strand of dark hair away from the girl's face, tucking it behind her ear. "Tomorrow is a new day." Her lips flickered up momentarily into a small smile, then she rose and exited the room, shutting the door gently behind her.

Fah lay back down on her mattress. She tried to push the events of the past day to the back of her mind, the nausea in her stomach crawling like cockroaches and her eyes simmering with tears. She resolved that the next morning, she would take charge of her own fate.

She rolled over, buried her face in the stale stench of the pillow, and cried herself to sleep.

Daeng tilted her head back, a moan of ecstasy escaping from her lips. The act was practiced so many times there was no way her client would imagine it was falsified. A few minutes later, she rolled off the bed and got dressed, slipping on her miniskirt and tight tank top.

"Thank you, Daeng," Hiaa told her, tucking his designer shirt into black trousers. He reached for his Louis Vuitton wallet and pulled out thirty-thousand baht.

"Hiaa," she purred, slipping the crisp bills from his grasp as she clung on to his arm, the word for *uncle* familiar on her tongue. "This is all I get...?"

Hiaa pursed his lips, his black mustache quivering. "It was just the usual, though. You didn't do anything special today."

She pouted. "You know I'm your favorite girl." Leaning in, she breathed in his ear, "And I let you go bareback."

Hiaa sighed, defeated. "Fine," he said, extracting another ten-thousand. "But only because I know you'll give me something extra next time."

She plucked the money from his fingers. "You're the best, Hiaa." She gave him a peck on the cheek before sending him off.

She kicked off her red stilettos, collapsing back on to the thin mattress. Her shoulders ached, and her mouth was dry. She eyed the bag on the dressing table—next to the silver wrappers of dozens of condoms, the glint of a needle caught her eye, beckoning.

She shook her head, clearing her thoughts. *Not after what happened to Prim.*

Instead, she lit up a cigarette and blew smoke in rings up into the air, ignoring the cries of the new girl next door reverberating through the thin walls. It was nearly the end of the month, and she made a mental note to visit the post office and mail some money back home to her parents. She stared up at the whizzing fan above, lost in its cyclical motion and the flickering fluorescent lights, dazed in a stupor when the door creaked open, and a man stepped into the room.

"Fah?"

It took a few moments before she recognized the name, not having heard it for so long. Her eyes snapped open, and she sprung up, crushing the cigarette butt in an ashtray, a string of profanities escaping from her mouth.

A familiar face, with tightly cropped black hair, warm eyes fringed by the crinkle of early crow's feet, and a homely, button nose. She knew that if he smiled, his lips would reveal white teeth blinding against his dark skin, tanned from days in the sun.

"*Mekk?*" she croaked incredulously, her throat dry. She rose up from the bed. "*Mekk!*" She closed the distance between them, launching herself into his arms. She felt him grunt as her weight hit his chest, his body stiffening. After a few seconds, he relaxed, and his arms closed around her, sinking into her embrace.

"How..." she spoke into his shirt, "how did you find me?" His body was warm, and despite the polluted smog of Bangkok, he smelled like dewy grass.

"I..." Mekk hesitated. She waited patiently as he searched for words. Then he tugged himself away, untangling his limbs from hers.

She stared quizzically at his face, noticing with a growing horror as his eyes swept the room, sucking in the scene: the dirtied bed, her scanty clothing, the bag of condoms and needles.

His features darkened. "Your face was plastered in front of the building," he replied, his voice low as he met her eyes.

Her stomach dropped. Of course—the illuminated photograph of her that brought in so many customers. She became uncomfortably aware of herself and how she must have appeared to him. "Why are you here?"

"I came to Bangkok to find you."

The panic boiled, rising up in her chest. "Why? Is everything at home all right?"

"Everything's fine."

The reasons behind his presence struck. Her hands began to quiver uncontrollably, and she grasped at the material of her own skirt to stop them from moving.

Mekk shook his head slowly. He pulled out from his pocket a familiar item—straw braided and knotted to form a ring. "Your father gave me permission," he murmured. "I was going to ask you to come home."

She swallowed, the action just as painful as the look on his face. "*Mekk...*" she managed to choke out.

"I thought you were working as a masseuse."

"I am..." She realized it was the wrong response as his jaw stiffened. She knew what kind of masseuse he meant, and he knew what kind of masseuse she had become. She wanted to cram the words back into her mouth.

"It's okay," he said quickly. "We can still go back to what we were."

She nodded, then her brow corrugated, and she stopped nodding and began to shake her head. "I can't."

"What do you mean?" Mekk grabbed her arms, his dark hands warm on her light skin, the confused frustration held back on his face.

"What is there to go back to? There's no future for us." Fah shook her head again, this time, more decisively. "This is the only way for me to make enough money for my family and myself."

Slowly—excruciatingly—Mekk let go of her arms and stepped back, ripping open the tangible bond between them, leaving the wound open and raw. "I can't," he echoed what she'd said, his voice toneless.

She became conscious of the heat rising behind her eyes. "Can't what?" she rasped. Her throat was closing up, making it difficult to talk.

Mekk cast his eyes away. "I can't be with a..." he muttered, and immediately she knew the word he couldn't say, couldn't even form on his tongue.

"A what, Mekk?" she prodded, goading him on even though she knew the answer would crush her. "*A what?*" she spat.

Mekk finally raised his gaze to meet hers once more. "You're tainted," he replied. His face betrayed no emotion, but it was his voice that gave it away. She had to let the sound reverberate a few times in her head before finally deciphering what it was, dripping with an uncertain hesitance—disgust. A seething anger bubbled, to the surface, escaping in tears that raced down her cheeks and dribbled off her chin.

"I've made my choice," she declared. "This is me now. This is who I am."

"I know." He stared down at the handmade ring in his palm. "After all these years away from you," he chuckled softly, the sound wrenching her apart, "I missed you so much. And there I was, worrying about whether or not you'd remember me, whether you'd found a new Bangkok boy, whether this ring would be good enough for you, and whether it would live up to your new city-girl expectations."

She softened. He'd waited for her...perhaps there was still hope.

"It's more than enough," she found herself sobbing, clinging on to her last shred of dignity as she moved towards him, reaching out.

He stepped back. "It's fine, Fah. I understand." His face had stiffened, the harsh light creating alien angular features on his face. "But please understand me too."

He shut the door behind him.

She stared at the little red word printed on the piece of paper. She felt her fingers shake, her body sway, and her eyes blur. The rest of the blue ink—*Results; Options; Medical Treatment*—faded to the color of the sky, and the white paper became the dapple of clouds. *Fah and Mekk.*

She could never forget what he'd said—how he called her beautiful, how he'd promised "one day"—just like how she couldn't get his last words out of her head. They were glued into her memory, etched there like a new tattoo that was scabbing over, itching to be scratched, nagging at the back of her mind for weeks. Finally, she gave in and got tested.

"Tainted," he'd said. She guessed he was right.