

## Chance Encounter

### **Bangkok, April 1974:**

Lucille was crossing the lobby of the Siam Inter-Continental when she heard a voice calling her. She turned abruptly, in a semi-pirouette, to find Sebastian Baxingdale approaching with a smile.

“Small world,” Baxingdale said, removing a pair of dark glasses. His grey eyes sparkled with pleasure. “You here with your famous husband no doubt, buying up another chunk of the Thai economy?” In his khaki safari suit he looked like some great white hunter from a bygone era.

“Actually my husband’s in Zurich,” Lucille replied cheerfully, “buying up a chunk of something else. With the stock market going great guns in Hong Kong I hardly see him.”

“Then you must be playing hookey from Madam Shek. That’s very naughty!”

“What about you? The pot calling the kettle black!”

“I’m different. I’m on duty.”

“Well, I’m off duty. My son’s at a Boy Scout camp for a week. So I’m off to Phuket tomorrow, to soak up a bit of sun and solitude.”

“Sounds ominous.”

“What? The sun, the solitude or the Boy Scout camp?”

Baxingdale chuckled. “Sorry, just being facetious.”

“No need to apologise. Why are you here? What kind of story are you working on?”

“Trying to find out what’s going on in Cambodia. There are rumours of Khmer Rouge massacres in the civil war. I’m off to Aranyaprathet tomorrow, to try and get in. Legally if possible, via Poipet. Otherwise through the jungle. I have to finalize travel arrangements and pick up equipment.”

“Isn’t that rather dangerous, entering a country through the back door? Illegally too, I imagine.”

“No alternative, I’m afraid. Got to get at the truth. Verifying misfortunes happens to be how I earn my living.”

“You poor man! Do all journalists risk life and limb for their profession?”

Baxingdale smiled. “I’d like to think at least a few do. Look, what are you doing for dinner tonight? I can expound on professional ethics and sacrifices over a meal.”

Lucille hesitated. She had not seen him for more than a year after the Red Cross Ball, till she bumped into him as she was leaving Madam Shek’s after her Chinese lesson. She learnt then he was also taking lessons and she had admired him for making the effort. She now remembered how catty Phoebe Knight had been at the ball and felt mischievous. Having dinner with him would irritate Phoebe no end. But aloud she said: “I’m not sure that’s a very good idea. People might talk.”

“Oh, come on! This is Bangkok. Who’s to know? It’s not as if we were having a clandestine affair. Only dinner. It may be my last supper. I might get blown up by a land mine tomorrow. Or shot. Would you deny a condemned man his final wish? Besides, I can take you to the best French restaurant east of Marseilles.”

“In Bangkok? That I’ve got to experience!”

“Good. See you in the lobby at seven. You were on your way out. Can I give you a lift?”

“No, thanks. I was just going to walk down the street to look for presents. Women have to do such things, you know.”

“Okay, see you later.”

The moment Baxingdale disappeared Lucille regretted her decision. She remembered dropping her guard the evening of the ball. His self-assured presence, his deep baritone voice, had touched her. She had long associated that kind of voice with manliness. As a teenager she had fantasized over being serenaded, just like in the movies. After a few drinks she might get carried away again. She warned herself to be vigilant as she stepped outside the hotel.

The morning air was warm and close. She strolled in the direction of the Erawan Shrine. Located on a small plot at the corner of a busy intersection, it was dedicated to a local deity with four faces. She had been too embarrassed to tell Baxingdale where she was heading.

The deity commanded a big reputation among Hong Kong’s society ladies. Many made frequent pilgrimages to Bangkok, claiming the deity could grant wishes if convinced of a person’s sincerity. They talked about its powers in confidential whispers during shopping sprees, afternoon tea parties and tango lessons designed to revitalize flagging passions. They exchanged stories of how so-and-so had secured a late pregnancy or how a certain woman had got her husband’s mistress to disappear after making offerings at the shrine.

Stories abounded about the deity’s supernatural powers. Some said it had been born out of a golden egg from heaven and was an embodiment of all virtue, moral excellence, kindness and compassion. Others said it had been sired by a sacred dragon with seven claws and came into being from lotuses spewed from the dragon’s mouth.

Lucille was half-sceptical about such tales. But then, religions were full of strange beliefs. Serenity had told her of great Buddhist masters imposing koans or nonsensical tasks upon their disciples, like hearing the sound of a one-handed clap or seeing their original faces before they were born. She did not know whether the deity figured in the Buddhist pantheon. Serenity undoubtedly would. But, if she had asked before coming to Bangkok, her mother-in-law would certainly guess what was in her heart.

On arrival at the shrine, Lucille found a small gathering of supplicants making offerings. The aroma of incense hung in the air. The golden deity with four faces was enthroned beneath a golden canopy decorated with mosaics in glittering reds, greens and yellows and enclosed within steel railings. Vendors hovered, offering sets of candles, joss sticks and garlands of flowers at fancy prices. Four sets were required because supplications were supposed to be made in front of each face, moving progressively to the left.

The moment Lucille arrived, vendors milled around her, importuning in high-pitched Thai voices. Lucille hesitated. This was absurd, she thought. How could she have used taking the sun in Phuket as an alibi for this silly venture? She could not be that desperate! How could a modern, educated woman like her seek divine intervention from some dubious god? Yet there remained at the back of her mind an irrational hope, as tenacious as the hopes of others for the winning numbers in a ten million to one lottery draw.

The vendors continued to press around her. She shook her head and smiled defensively in response. Gradually they peeled off in search of more promising customers, all except for a teenage girl with a harelip, who persisted with an awkward grin. In the end Lucille felt sorry for her and bought a set of offerings.

No harm done, she thought, as she followed the routine. She lit candles and joss sticks before each of the four faces and hung the garlands on the metal railings. She repeated her secret wish for freedom together with her son and bowed before each of the four faces, without entertaining any real hope of her wish being granted.

What was her wish anyway? Did freedom mean happiness? Did it mean being rid of her unloving husband? If so, that would involve leaving Hong Kong. Practical people associated with Xavier would cut her after the split and she would be left with no friends. And what about her son? She definitely would not leave without him and Xavier would never allow that. And Serenity. Could she abandon her after the kindnesses she had shown? All roads seemed to lead back to the same dead end.

When she returned to the hotel, she found a message from Baxingdale, suggesting casual clothes for the evening. She selected a white linen trouser suit with a halter top, which left her back and shoulders bare.

She turned up promptly in the lobby at seven, to find him already there, dressed in a black open-necked shirt and a pair of white trousers. His hand held a purple orchid.

“I’m glad you’ve dressed sensibly,” Baxingdale said, proffering the orchid.

“Oh, you shouldn’t have!” Lucille said. “It’s gorgeous. Thank you very much.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t mention the restaurant has no air conditioning.”

“I thought you said it was the best French restaurant east of Marseilles.”

“I did. But ‘best’ doesn’t mean most fancy or most modern.”

“What’s its name?”

“Hasn’t got a name.”

“You’re pulling my leg!”

“A tempting prospect! But the restaurant really has no name. It’s run by a Thai friend of mine, a linguist by the name of Sunand, and most of the cooking is done by his wife, a Vietnamese. He used to be a language professor in one of the local universities but gave it up to work as an interpreter for the American military in Vietnam. The pay was better, you see. Then he saw what was going on and got sick of it. He came back here and opened a restaurant. He felt he had chosen the wrong side for the sake of money and that had stripped him of the moral authority to return to teaching. Come, I’ll tell you the rest in the taxi.”

During the ride Lucille learnt that the restaurant was located in a two-storeyed tenement in a depressing suburb. The top floor was used as a hostel for college girls of slender means studying in Bangkok. In return for free bed and board, Sunand expected them to work a certain number of hours each week waiting at table and serving as cleaners and dishwashers. It was his way of affording them opportunity for practising English or French and gaining an insight into foreign behaviour. The restaurant was patronized mainly by academics, journalists, junior diplomats and staff from the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East. Sunand and his wife lived in a bungalow in the compound in the rear.

When they arrived, Lucille found a deep, open-fronted establishment with about a dozen tables covered with plastic tablecloths in red and white checks. Most of the tables were already occupied. Overhead a number of electric fans whirled, wafting out smells of cooking onto the pavement.

“See the number on the building?” Baxingdale said, pointing to a narrow six-inch long metal plaque nailed above the centre of the wide entrance. “That’s the house number. Regulars just call it 178.”

A small, rotund man wearing a pair of black-rimmed glasses at once rushed forward to greet them. “Ah, my English friend, it is good to see you again,” he said, in slightly stilted English. “What brings you to my poor country this time?”

“A secret mission,” Baxingdale replied, hugging him like a long lost friend, at the same time waving to a couple of diners.

“Ah, another expose!” Sunand said, in his excitable voice. “But bringing along such a charming lady? Can’t be all work.”

“Sunand, this is a friend from Hong Kong, Lucille Chu. Chance placed us in the same hotel. I’ve told her this was the best French restaurant east of Marseilles. So don’t make a liar out of me.”

Sunand placed his palms together in a traditional Thai greeting. “My English friend is lavish with praises. My humble establishment is honoured and will do its utmost. Such a charming lady deserves the best table in the house, away from both the kitchen in the back and the pavement at the front, but close to a window with a capricious breeze.”

On the way to their table Baxingdale shook hands with a suave dark-skinned man. He did not effect introductions.

“Indonesian attache. A genial rogue. Let me explain Sunand’s regime. There’s no menu. You can always get onion soup or a salad for starters. The daily dishes are written on the blackboard on the wall. There’s only red or white house wine, both very good. That’s it. No frills.”

Lucille looked over at the blackboard. The choices were coq au vin, lapin provencale and bouillabaisse.

“I’ll have the chicken and a glass of red wine, please. No starter,” she said, when Sunand came to take their orders.

“Same for me.”

“You seem quite at home here,” Lucille said, after their drinks had been served.

“It’s the itinerant life. One has to develop friendships and safe corners like commercial travellers. I used to nip over here quite a lot when I was covering Vietnam.”

“The customers are mostly foreigners. Don’t the Thais like French food?”

“They do, but most are too poor to afford Sunand’s fare, even at his modest prices. The rich prefer their meals in more sumptuous surroundings, with waitresses serving them on their knees.”

They chatted like old friends during the meal. The coq au vin was excellent, as was the wine. Sunand came by occasionally to enquire if everything was to their liking. As the evening proceeded, the wine took its effect. They began telling each other about their childhoods and their families and their likes and dislikes.

“You know, I can’t really believe I’m having dinner alone in a strange town with the wife of one of the most powerful tycoons in the Far East,” Baxingdale said, after tatin and coffee had been served. “Do you remember when I bumped into you at Madam Shek’s? I wanted to invite you for a cup of tea then but I didn’t dare.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t want anything bad to happen to you.”

“How could anything bad happen to me through having a cup of tea with you?”

“I jinx women, I’m afraid. They get blown up or sent to labour camps for exchanging a few words with me.”

“Oh, dear, you sound as if you head an anti-feminist terror group! What of Phoebe Knight? Has anything bad happened to her?”

“She’s had to settle for less than what she wanted.”

“Don’t we all?”

Lucille gazed into Baxingdale’s grey eyes and saw for the first time how much sadness they contained. He appeared slightly lost and yet the eyes were so appealing that she wanted to comfort him. But she couldn’t find the words. So she lapsed into silence.

“Hey, do you like jazz?” Baxingdale asked, suddenly.

“Sure!”

“Great! I’ll take you to the greatest jazz spot west of New Orleans.”

Lucille laughed. “In Bangkok again? Has this one got a name or also only a number?”

“This one’s got a name. It’s called the Blue Note.”

Baxingdale settled the bill and, after much ceremonious leave-taking, hailed a taxi for Patpong, the night life district.

The Blue Note was a dim-lit establishment, with tables packed close together and a long bar. There was a good crowd and at the bar a couple of unescorted Asian girls were dispensing bold, inviting looks. Otherwise the customers were civilized and cosmopolitan. A four-member Filipino combo was playing and half a dozen couples were dancing on a circular space measuring little more than six feet in diameter.

They found a table close to the band.

“Miguel!” Baxingdale called, waving to the stocky, grizzled saxophonist and bandleader. The man smiled and began playing with added verve.

Baxingdale suggested neat brandy as the mixed drinks at the club were unreliable. Lucille agreed. When the music ended, Baxingdale excused himself and went up to the band to exchange slaps on the back with Miguel before shaking hands with each of the other musicians. Animated conversation followed. After much to-ing and fro-ing Miguel handed Baxingdale his saxophone and picked up the microphone.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Miguel boomed. “We have a special treat tonight. An English friend, a distinguished writer, is going to play jazz for us. No! No! Don’t make for the exits! The idea is a little strange, yes. The combination of an Englishman and jazz is -- how do you say it? -- a bit odd? But this Englishman knows his jazz. Please give him a big hand, ladies and gentlemen, my friend Sebastian Baxingdale.”

Baxingdale bowed, Miguel picked up a clarinet and the augmented band began playing “Blues in the Night”.

Lucille gave herself over to the music. Baxingdale was good. As she listened to him nursing melancholy notes out of the saxophone she felt she had been lured inside his world of displaced people, exiled musicians, professors lost to teaching, women consigned to labour camps, journalists bearing witness for the world. All had been uprooted, no longer belonging anywhere, driven by economic winds and political tides. Baxingdale was comfortable among such people because he, too, was a displaced person. He had told her earlier in the evening he had lost his country because he no longer approved of what it was turning into.

They were two of a kind, she and Baxingdale. An accident of birth had made her American but she did not belong there. Neither did she truly belong in Hong Kong. Her home was there, her son was there and the Chinese roots she sought were there. But it was also full of commercial vulgarity and phoney snobbery.

Ah Yuen, too, was only American through accident of birth. He did not belong across the Pacific. Hong Kong was his real home. Between the gentle teachings of Serenity and the demanding pedagogy of Tutor Tsim, between the heroics of Bruce Lee and the eccentricities of the Evergreen Tea House, he was already putting down roots. To take him to America would turn him into part of the next generation of displaced persons. Yet, if she could not take him with her, then what was the point of freedom at all? A great part of herself would be dead.

Baxingdale’s saxophone number finished to thunderous applause. He returned to the table, smiling broadly and sweating a little. “Hope I haven’t made a complete ass of myself. It’s been a long time since I played with Miguel and his boys. It felt really good.”

“You were really good,” Lucille said. “A man of many talents, I see. What got you into jazz? Not a particularly British thing, is it?”

“Jazz is more international and cross-cultural than most realize. Look at what’s just been produced by the coming together of an Englishman and four Filipinos. Look at the people here, from all corners of the earth, trying to make sense of it. It’s not just music. It’s music, moods,

colours, experiences, dreams, subversions, all absorbed and re-arranged, synthesized, perfected into a new reality, a fresh statement, a challenging point of view. It's marvellous. It's like encountering a new love in an unlikely place."

"Wow!" Lucille gasped.

They sipped their brandies and gave themselves over to the mood and the music. Suddenly, an incongruity crept across Lucille's mind. How could Sebastian be so carefree on the eve of risking his life for a horror story? Had he become so reconciled to the notion of death? Had he nothing he wanted to live for? A mixture of concern and pity welled inside her. She wanted to tell him to be careful but that would sound banal.

Just then, the band began playing the same Nat King Cole ballad they had danced to at the Red Cross ball.

"They're playing our song," Baxingdale said. "Shall we?"

Lucille hesitated. She knew, even before his hand touched her bare back, that she was about to find an unlikely love in an unlikely place.