



KULAP

STORIES FROM TRAKAUL II

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Chapter 1

Vietnam

I was finally arriving to Vietnam, on the secluded beaches of the beautiful island of Phu Quoc, very close to Cambodia. I had gone by plane to Ho Chi Ming and, from there, I had embarked on an exhausting road trip. I shared a beat-up car with a local; I didn't want to resort to rental agencies or public transport.

I slept outside and, first thing in the morning, I took the ferry to my destination. I could have taken a flight, which would have been faster, but I didn't want my location to be known. What consumed me in reality was the desire to see Sumalee. We had kept in touch through fake profiles on social networks where she was posting what she was doing so that I could follow her location. After traveling through various parts of the country, I imagine to find the ideal place to settle, Sumalee decided to stay on the island of Phu Quoc. Although touristy, it was not well known. Since she was fluent in English, she found a job quickly and without having to answer too many questions.

As we approached the island, I could see that everything I had read about it in travel guides, never on the internet so that I didn't leave any trace, was true. From afar you could see small paradisiacal beaches with the jungle behind them, dotted from time to time with larger buildings, hotels. I didn't care about any of that. I was only coming for one thing: to finally see Sumalee again.

I still remembered clearly the trace left by the boat in Singapore when she went away, just moments after telling her that I could not go with her, that I had to think of a way to liberate ourselves from Trakaul and, above all, to forgive her.

After so many months apart, I had finally found the right moment. I told my two Trakaul colleagues that I wanted to go sightseeing in Southeast Asia and take advantage of the region's cheap flights. First, I took a two-week trip to Burma, where I depicted the perfect tourist. My idea was to get them used to those trips so they wouldn't have me controlled all the time. I visited the most typical places: the Bagan pagodas, the Inle Lake, the walking routes through Paradise Island, I enjoyed the sunrise over the U-bein Bridge... All this while thinking what it would be like to live it with Sumalee by my side. When I found the opportunity, I got lost in the crowd, I used tourist services that I negotiated with locals, instead of travel agencies, and always paid cash. I didn't know if they were watching me, but it was wiser to think of the worst-case scenario and assume they were. Based on that presumption, I wanted to get them used to that style of traveling, disappearing and being difficult to control.

After the first trip, I took others in different regions of Thailand and the surrounding countries. Until it was time to organize the trip to Vietnam, which was the goal of all the other ones. I had told them that I would wander around the country, getting to know the day-to-day reality of its people as I had done the other times. On the surface, it seemed fine with them.

And there I was. A few kilometers from Sumalee and her without knowing it. Since we couldn't communicate directly, she didn't know anything about me, and I didn't know exactly where she was on the island. I knew her fake name from the Singaporean passport, Anong, and the area where she worked; with that I would look for her. Regardless, I didn't know what I would find. It was true that she had been posting some photos on the internet, but I had no idea how

she felt or if she had remade her life. Would she have already forgotten the love that brought us together? Would she have found someone else? Was she still thinking of me? Was she happy? All those doubts, but I was determined to solve them.

When the boat arrived, I met the man with whom I had arranged my stay. To continue with being as little visible as possible, instead of a hotel I had chosen to contact a local to rent me a house and a motorcycle with which to tour the island at a very reasonable price. I gave him a made-up name and he didn't ask questions. He didn't have any reason to doubt my word. If someone looked for me, the official version was that I was staying in a hotel in Ho Chi Ming, more than three hundred kilometers from there. I actually had a reservation that I would never use.

The man took me in a rickety van to the house and, once inside, gave me the keys to the motorcycle and a map of the island on which the house and the port were marked. I asked him about the area where I thought Sumalee worked and he pointed it out to me. I paid him what was agreed, and he left happy. I didn't even open my suitcase. The first thing I did was to study the map carefully so that I could leave as soon as possible. There was only one paved road on the entire island; the rest, as I had seen from the van, were red dirt roads. The journey to Sumalee was only twenty kilometers, but, due to the state of the roads, I calculated that it would take me more than an hour. With the helmet well placed on my head, I started the old bike and set off.

An hour and a half later —I got lost twice on the way— I reached my destination. I parked the motorcycle and went to the only restaurant there. I was starving. I sat down for a bite at one of the tables overlooking the beach and relaxed my body; I needed to relieve the tension of the trip from my head. As I ate, I watched the people. There weren't too many Westerners, and the few I saw were quite young. Twenty to thirty years on average. In the meandering of

languages, Vietnamese aside, I was also able to identify a couple speaking Thai, a language in which I had made great progress. In the distance, I saw a group approaching pulling a cart. From their faces, I assumed they were coming from a diving club with tourists. I imagined that the cart had all the necessary: bottles, wet suits, regulators, masks, fins, booties, flotation vests... Indeed, they entered the beach and went to a boat that was waiting for them very close to the shore. There, a couple of Vietnamese men unloaded the materials from the cart and put them on the boat. An oriental woman was talking with the four young people, two men and two women looking like Nordics based on the paleness of their skin. She had to be the translator. She looked familiar. I put my hand on my forehead to cover the sun and see her better. Yes, it was someone familiar. It was Sumalee. My heart skipped a bit. I didn't know what to do. So many doubts, so much preparation and, at last, I had her a few meters away. What should I tell her? How should I approach her? What if she didn't want to see me?

After a few seconds of hesitation, I paid for the food and got a little closer to see her better. Her hair was short and brown, which seemed strange to me. Even so, she was beautiful. As much as I remembered or even more. A sea of mixed feelings surfaced at the same time. Did I really want to get back with her? Did I still love her? Could I trust her again? I watched her without her seeing me as she tended to the divers. After they embarked and went away, I approached her.

"Sumalee," —I said hesitantly.

She turned scared and, as soon as she recognized me, she stared at me petrified.

"Da... Da... David..." —hesitated.

"Yes, precious, it's me. I was finally able to come and see you," —I confirmed unsure, not knowing what to expect.

"You are... You're here..."

She looked nervous, even cold. I didn't quite know what to make of her attitude.

"I told you that, from the moment you left from Singapore, I would dedicate myself body and soul to finding a way to escape the claws of Trakaul. And here I am. I did it!"

She kept looking at me with absolute surprise, total bewilderment. She looked both ways and I thought she was going to run away. She looked at me again, and finally moved. She jumped on me and gave me such a big hug that, for a moment, I had a hard time breathing. I felt a great relief.

"You're here, you're here —she repeated over and over again between stuttering and sobbing—. You're here."

Suddenly she pulled away and looked at me scared. I was expectant, surprised.

"Is this safe? The fact that you are here? That we are together?"

"I don't know; but, if Trakaul knew where you were, I guess you would have been dead a long time ago. Better said, we would both be dead. I don't think they would have forgiven me for deceiving them."

"I don't know, I don't know. I would prefer that we go from here to a place with fewer people."

"Of course. Do you have to go back to work?"

"No, I'm done for today."

"Well, I'll take you on the motorcycle to the house I have rented. It's to the east of the island, where the main pier is."

She stared for a moment, as if she didn't see it clearly. In the end she nodded, gave me another big hug, looked at me and said:

"All right, where did you say that bike is?"

I gave her the helmet and within an hour we were at my house. The return was much shorter than the way there. Not only because I already knew the way, but because I no longer had the anxiety of the reunion and because I could feel Sumalee's arms around my torso,

squeezing it tightly, her head resting on my back, her body stuck to mine. I could have driven for days like that.

When we arrived, we entered the house holding hands, without saying anything. Once the door was closed, she seemed to relax, finally away from any prying eyes. We stood in front of each other, looking at each other as if we were trying to remember our faces. Little by little we approached, and I stroked her face. I grabbed her by the waist and brought her a little closer to me and gave her a soft kiss on the forehead. Then, with my right hand, I fiddled with her hair, now so short and different. I bent down a little so I could smell it. Jasmine, always jasmine. Yes, it was my Sumalee. She put her hands on my chest, pushed me away a little, and I could see the intensity in her eyes, the fire in her gaze. I didn't think anymore. I lifted her and took her to the room like two newlyweds on their wedding night. Once there, I gently laid her on the bed and began to unbutton my shirt. She also began to take her clothes off. While we took off all our clothes, we did not stop looking at each other with such ardor, that the heat we generated could almost be touched. When we finished, she laid on the bed and I proceeded on all four until my face was above hers. For a few moments, we remained in that position. Noticing how the craving grew inside us as we tried to control it. Finally, I started kissing her. First with small kisses, softly. On the cheeks, on the neck, along the nose, on the lips. Small kisses, hardly any rubbing, which gained force until, finally, our lips hooked, and all the accumulated passion was unleashed. A frenzy of tongues dancing like flames of fire, in an outburst of madness accumulated in the delay. We devoured each other with our mouths. Sometimes, the momentum made us bite each other's neck and ears. It was a climax of lust, the disease of love at its peak. We could not wait any longer, our bodies were asking for it. I penetrated her hard. At first leaving my penis inside, not moving, putting pressure as if I wanted to crush her with it, then I started with a wild back and

forth. Sumalee groaned and groaned until, with a choked scream, she climaxed. Seconds later, I too reached orgasm. It was of an intensity that I hadn't felt for a long time.

I dropped by her side, and we turned around so we could hug. With our foreheads touching, perceiving our breath, recovering. When our breathing became normal, Sumalee moved to straddle me and began kissing me. This time in a much more tender, delicate way. As soon as she noticed my incipient erection, she inserted my member and started a movement back and forth. I raised my arms and caressed her breasts, squeezed them, pinched her nipples... How much I had missed those small but firm breasts! I grabbed her waist and forced her to lean forward so I could kiss her. With my hands on her ass, I helped her keep up with the rhythm of the movement. I noticed waves of pleasure running through my body, my racing heart, and burst into a less intense orgasm, but longer than the previous one. In that moment, in the midst of my spasms, at the height of the joy, Sumalee pointed a revolver at my head, one too big for her little fingers, turned her head a little, as if she were curious, drew a half smile and shot me without hesitation. I noticed my head exploding in all directions.

With a sudden movement, I woke up and sat on the bed. I gasped trying to catch some air and felt my scared face. It was a dream. A fucking dream. A nightmare. A recurring delirium.

It wasn't the first time it had happened, and I was sure it wouldn't be the last. It was a more and more elaborate dream, to which real details were added from what I was finding through Sumalee's fake profile on social networks and from my own memories. Little by little, my dreams, or rather, nightmares, had become more complex, more real. What always remained the same was the end: one way or another, Sumalee ended up shooting me, stabbing me, poisoning me, drowning me... The ways were very creative, the result invariably

the same. A sudden and unexpected death. A murder. A betrayal. Again.

The nights I didn't dream of this, I dreamt about Bang Kwang, the hellish prison in Thailand where I was imprisoned. I would wake up screaming not to be beaten and crouched as if I was being beaten. I would recollect the torture, the rape, the hunger, the suffering and even the sensations that the Rohypnol's withdrawal produced me, the tranquilizing pills that I stuffed myself with for a time while in prison. The night was not my best time. For a while now I was not sleeping much.

I got out of the bed and looked out the window hoping to clear my head a little. The constant noise of Bangkok only made my headache worse. I stayed in Singapore very little after Sumalee left. It was very dangerous for me. They could recognize me. That's why, once I was supposedly done with my mission to kill Sumalee, I was taken back to Thailand. Here we were given instructions over the phone of what my team and I had to do: Khalan, Arthit and I. It was always the same person who called and, as long as we knew the password of the day, which we received beforehand, we did what he said.

There were a few terrible months in which even I could see how I changed with every mission. It was like when as a young man I belonged to a gang of deluded children who believed themselves to be the kings of the world but elevated to the umpteenth power. I had beaten so many people that I didn't even know how many, I paid for contract killings, including that of a twelve-year-old boy to punish a father who asked for money from the wrong people; I burned properties from which I saw people come out on fire who survived and who would spend the rest of their lives deformed, transformed into monsters; I extorted, I paid bribes... There was nothing left from the David from a few years ago. Even if I compared myself to the one who had done the first missions for Trakaul, there was little

resemblance. I had become a dark and unpredictable being fighting an eternal inner battle against himself.

When I went back to bed, I felt an intense puncture on one side. It was the result of the intense Muay Thai workouts I was doing. Not only did I train almost every day, from Monday to Sunday, but two or three times a week we had real fights in which it was difficult not to get hurt. Several colleagues had ended up in the hospital unconscious or with a broken bone. At first, I was afraid of combat and pain. It was difficult for me to strike a blow with all my strength for fear of hurting and receiving the same. I overcame all that after many defeats. I focused by imagining that I was facing one of my prison bullies, those scumbags who did nothing but to beat me up just because. I soon discovered that I was good, very good. As I improved my physical form and learned the combat techniques, everyone saw that I was very good at it. Every time making it harder and harder to be defeated. I had a great endurance to pain, maybe because of what I suffered in Bang Kwang or because of my past as a gang member or because of my boxing training or all of those. I combined the strokes with fluidity, improved the technique and was in very good physical condition. The damage from my blows was growing exponentially. One of the things I discovered when I boxed for a while and I had already left the gang to which I belonged, was that in a fight you face the opponent alone, but with you is all the power of the gym where you trained, the push of the fatigue partners, the advice of the most veterans and the corrections of your coach. In my case Angel, who took me off the streets and taught me to fight not only in the ring but also in life. When you are fighting, you modify your body and mental disposition, creating a symbiosis. Your body becomes an intelligent machine capable of regulating and reacting without waiting for conscious commands from the brain. There are boxers who have continued to fight, and even won, almost unconscious and not knowing what they were doing. Angel said it

wasn't a matter of mentality, that if you're a fighter and you're ready, you fight. It's as simple as that. Pure instinct.

In the end, I had to change to the most reputable gym in the area to continue progressing and I began to organize fights with the best fighters from other schools to get rivals on my level. There, one day, I realized that there was a poster in English and Thai with the twelve rules of practitioner ethics:

1. *Make yourself useful to the public.*
2. *Be courteous and polite to everyone whenever possible.*
3. *Do not be violent with your words, thoughts, or actions.*
4. *Be loyal to yourself and others.*
5. *Show perseverance when possible.*
6. *Be willing to sacrifice for the good of your country if necessary.*
7. *Have a strong disposition and determination ("as strong as the steel, as hard as the diamond").*
8. *Carry high morale.*
9. *Take good care of your name and that of the camp.*
10. *Train and exercise on a regular basis.*
11. *Do not take advantage of your opponent by breaking the competition rules.*
12. *Show respect for the laws of nature.*

It made me remember my time in jail. An erratic Thai wrestler named Channarong, near the end of my stay, decided to help me out a bit with my training and, from time to time, would blurt out one of those phrases. Most of the time he left me wondering what he meant and how I could apply that in jail. It would have been better if he helped me fight better instead of giving me advice that, there, was of no use to me. Who would have thought that I would end up seeing them again.

They had also given me a Brazilian-made Taurus pistol and, in case I needed something less lethal, a taser that gave electric shocks of more than a million volts. I had bought myself a pair of brass knuckles that I never parted with. Since I had never owned a pistol, we had to go to a shooting range for several days to learn how to use it. Not that I was an Olympic marksman, but I wasn't bad at shooting, either. At first, having a gun was very uncomfortable, but after going on various missions with it, it gave me a sense of security, even superiority, which made me feel much more relaxed. The hardest thing was keeping myself under control. It was easy to look smug at the world knowing I was backed by the thirteen rounds in the magazine plus the one in the chamber. Getting carried away by the arrogance I felt, the fear that Trakaul generated, the violence, was easy. Sometimes I was scared that an uncontrollable demon would be released within me, a sadistic beast that, once unleashed, I could not lock up again. The missions forced me to be tough, relentless. But where would that road lead me? The answers to that question scared me. I didn't want to lose sight of my goal: to take revenge on Trakaul for what they had put me through and to free myself from them. Later I would see if I would forgive Sumalee or make another life on my own, but the first thing was revenge.

Chapter 2

Thailand

Just as I was finishing breakfast, Khalan and Arthit came to pick me up. That morning we had to go talk to a local drug dealer who owed money for the last two deliveries. The goal was to get the money out of him.

We got in the car. I never drove. Driving the car around Bangkok was too stressful for me. Their driving was absurd, chaotic. On the way to our missions, I liked to be quiet, to focus on what we had to do, what I had to become. I would breathe deeply with my eyes closed and visualize what I would do when I reached the destination. That's how I was preparing.

"Here we are" —Arthit said.

Khalan parked the car a block from the target, and after checking our weapons and getting out of the vehicle, we watched the warehouse door from a safe distance. Every now and then someone came in, most of the time looking haggard, but came out after a few minutes. It was clear that they were junkies buying their daily fix. After spending time in the Bang Kwang prison, I could no longer see them as before. I had always thought that drug addicts were idiots, that they didn't quit because they didn't really want to; but, after going through the same thing, and barely being able to leave them alive, I could only feel bad for them. It was hard to be hooked on

something like that and not be able to leave it. I barely managed it. Perhaps, if it weren't for the fact that they locked me in solitary confinement, I would still be hooked or, even worse, dead.

“Let's see. This is the plan — I addressed my colleagues taking the initiative — Khalan will go around the building and cover the back exit. Arthit and I will take advantage of when they open for a customer to enter or exit, to sneak into the warehouse. Once there, we will first ask for our money nicely and, only if it is strictly necessary, we will take it a different way.”

“I don't think we should be that careful. He's just a small-time camel. We go through the front entrance, kick down the door, shoot everyone who moves, and demand what is ours. And that's it!” —Khalan asserted, arrogant and bitter as always.

“That's it?” I asked amazed. I was still impressed by how stupid he was. “Do you really think staging a shootout in the middle of the city is a good idea? Entering without covering the exits it's a good idea? It's clear why you're not in charge, Khalan. Cover the back and follow the plan. Let's go!”

Khalan glared at me, assuming he had other faces, and went around the building. Arthit and I walked up to the door trying not to attract attention and stood next to it talking about inconsequential things, as if we had nothing to do with the story. Out of a sudden we heard screams and bangs from inside the warehouse. Arthit and I looked at each other not knowing what was happening. We stood still until we heard Khalan scream. As quickly as we could, we broke down the door and entered with the guns in our hands, ready for anything. The first thing we saw was a man with a shotgun standing by the door who shot Arthit point-blank in the chest, throwing him a meter back and leaving him lying on the ground with a growing pool of blood around him. I aimed at the man and fired several times in his direction, trying to cover a lot of space to make sure I hit the target. After several shots the man fell to the ground. I got him.

Beside me Khalan was emptying his gun on a man lying on the ground, already dead, and who in a few seconds I could identify as the camel we had come to visit. I didn't see anyone else. I ran to Arthit to try to press my hands against the wound so that he wouldn't bleed out, but it was impossible. In the center of his chest was a hole the size of an apple. He was dead and no one was going to be able to do anything to save his life. I had a hard time to force myself to react with that scene. In the distance police sirens could already be heard approaching.

"The back door, Khalan!" I yelled as I picked up Arthit's gun from the ground and ran to the back door. On the way, I grabbed a gym bag from the table, hoping it had something of value.

Khalan tucked his gun under his shirt and ran after me. As I left, I put away Arthit's gun and mine, put on a cap and lowered my head so that no one could see my face. We walked fast, getting away from the place, trying not to attract attention. We soon got into the crowd that gathered to see what had happened, and within minutes, we were in the car on our way home.

Once we arrived, I sat on a chair for a moment and tried to put my head in order. I had just killed a person and lost a partner. How did everything get out of hand?

"What a rush, right?" Khalan said interrupting my thoughts.

"What a rush? Really?" I was furious. "We just killed several people, Arthit is dead, and that's all you can think of?"

"Well, don't get mad. The Arthit thing is a bitch, especially for him ... —replied laughing—. He should had been more careful when entering."

"What the hell happened, Khalan? —I interrupted him—. Why were you inside the warehouse if you had to watch the back door?"

"I'm not going to talk about this, David. Whatever I say, you are gonna find it wrong and you are gonna criticize me. Like always.

I'm going to drink all the beer we have in the fridge and get a good buzz. Do whatever you want."

He grabbed all the beer he could from the fridge and locked himself in his room. I was confused by his behavior. As many explanations I tried to find, only one seemed the right one: Khalan had done what he wanted and entered the warehouse against my instructions. Because of him, Arthit was dead. Not that I cared much about him, but at least he was bearable. Instead, Khalan was unbearable.

Now came the worst. Make the call to the unknown person in charge and give them the bad news. Not wanting to bear Khalan's death, I omitted that it was all because of his stubborn disobedience. The man on the other end of the phone told us not to leave the house at all and that he would speak to his contacts in the police to see what they knew.

While we waited for instructions, I searched the gym bag that I had brought with me. Inside, apart from Arthit's gun and mine, were hundreds of sachets with drugs ready to be sold, a switchblade and a wad of bills. I counted the money and did a mental calculation with the sachets. It didn't cover a third of what he owed us. And since he was dead, we would never get it back. It was my first failure within Trakaul, and I didn't know how they were going to take it. Being dedicated to this type of matters, surely events like today's would have happened many other times. Shootings, deaths, losses ... At least they could use it as a warning for others that if they didn't pay, they would die.

An hour later I got the call from the supervisor.

"He's not dead."

"Arthit is not dead?" I asked surprised.

"Arthit? He has a hole the size of a plate in his chest. He's just as dead as the dealer. The other man is not dead. The one you shot."

"Ah, that one!" I exclaimed, not quite sure what to say.

“Where did you learn to shoot? Did you shoot him with your eyes closed or what? A bullet grazed his head, and he was knocked unconscious, but he made a full recovery. Now he could identify you.”

“That really is a bitch —I said out loud without thinking—. What are the instructions?” I asked, fearing the answer.

“Stay in the house. We will assign you a new partner and we will tell you what to do.”

“And the witness?”

“We have already taken care of it. We couldn't let you screw it up again.”

“Uh ... I'm sorry I failed.”

“They say that true leaders are forged after great failures, right? Think about what has gone wrong and why you haven't told me everything. Or did you think we wouldn't find out the full story?”

And he hung up, leaving me wondering if I would come out well off this one.

We were locked up for two days, without speaking to each other, eating the leftovers that we had in the fridge, until the third day there was a knock on the door. As I approached, I noticed a strong cigarette smell that was familiar. I was shocked. Kulap was waiting to enter, his eternal cigarette in his mouth. After so much time with the late Arthit and the idiot Khalan, I had to make an effort not to throw myself into his arms. Not only was he a familiar face, but he had helped me a lot from the beginning: he kept me company, taught me some Thai when we were locked in the first house when I got out of jail, he accompanied me on my first mission and raised a little my spirit by showing his more human side.

He greeted me with a laconic smile and a less forceful handshake than I expected, reluctant, and walked into the house, addressing Khalan and introducing himself.

“Nice to meet you. I have been sent to replace your partner who died in the last operation. The bosses want someone with more experience with you.”

“More experience than me?” Khalan asked sarcastically.

Kulap stared at him for a couple of seconds and turned to me without saying anything.

“David, which is my room?”

This will be fun, I thought to myself.

In the afternoon I made several attempts to get closer to Kulap. I tried to surprise him with my improved Thai and also gave him a demonstration of the Muay Thai techniques that I had learned, but he did not seem to be very impressed. He seemed indifferent to everything. I did not know what could have happened. After insisting and asking him many times, he told me that he had been going from one place to another doing missions and that he had also spent a week training with Thai army specialists. Nothing too specific; We both knew that everything we did for the organization was secret.. Otherwise, we would pay the consequences. The only thing he told me in more detail was that his last mission had been to end very slowly the life of a Trakaul member who had been taken prisoner, and that had given information to his captors. In Trakaul it was better to let them kill you than to loosen your tongue. Apart from that, I noticed him more distant than I had expected. He might not have had as good of a memory of me as I did of him.

Just as we were going to sleep, he received a short phone call. After he hung up, he thought for a moment and said:

“Tomorrow I will inform you of your next task. Be ready for the worst.”

And he walked away with the clear intention of not telling me anything else. I mulled over the phrase all night without being able to sleep.

In the morning Kulap brought us together to inform us of our next mission. I was very concerned about what he had told me the day before. We sat around the table in the living room. And Kulap began to speak.

“No half measures. We have to kill a traitor. They tried to trick Trakaul by posing as dead and fled to Vietnam to hide from us.”

A chill ran down my spine. I feared the worst.

“Her name is Sumalee Sintawichai, although she lives under a false name, and she is Thai —Kulap continued—. We can't allow her to hang around longer as if nothing happened.”

That was it. It was over. They had discovered us.

“What do we know about her?” —Khalan asked.

“She is hiding in Vietnam, on an island called Phu Quoc. She doesn't seem to have contact with anyone related to us, so once we're done with her, the problem will be over. This is a recent photo of her.” —Kulap said as he put the photo on the table.

I looked at the photo carefully and my heart skipped a beat. She was as pretty as I remembered her. Her hair was a little different, but the same jet-black color. Nothing chestnut like in my dreams. Her face appeared in the foreground where you could hardly see a beach just behind.

“Stunned! —Khalan said at the same time he gave me a slap to get me out of my reverie—. I would also fuck her before killing her ... Or after.”

I gripped the edges of the table tightly until my knuckles turned white, trying hard not to jump on the jerk and kill him right there and then. Kulap interrupted us.

“Focus! The instructions I have are that the three of us go there, but it has to be the savvy David who directs the operation and kills her. If he succeeds, he will be appointed permanent leader of our team. If not, I'll finish him myself.”

“Savvy why? —Khalan was outraged— And have our bosses gone crazy? David leader of what ...? I'll kill her with pleasure, but I won't let this idiot order me anything. Overall, it's just shooting a fifty-pound bitch. No way to fail.”

“Well —Kulap continued very calm—. If you want, I'll call John, who was the one who gave me the instructions, and you tell him that you think he's crazy and he's wrong. What do you think?”

Khalan glared at him but said nothing. He turned and went to the kitchen. A moment later he appeared with a bottle of Sangsom rum and slammed the door to his room. That idiot fixed everything by getting drunk.

“Do you have any questions about the mission? How is it to kill someone who should have already been dead, David?” —Kulap asked, pronouncing my name very slowly.

I closed my eyes for a few seconds trying to compose myself.

“I... I don't understand how she can be alive. I ... I killed her on the dock in Singapore ...” —I stuttered, I needed time to think.

“We leave for Vietnam first thing in the morning. We will go on a direct flight. Tell your friend so that he is prepared —He said with a dismissive nod in the direction of Khalan's room—. And let's see if you do it better this time.”

And he left the house leaving me alone.

I tried to reflect on what had happened. Lying on the bed, I analyzed what had happened hours before. There were some things that caught my attention: How had they discovered Sumalee? Was it true that they did not know that we maintained contact on occasion through false profiles on social networks? In Trakaul they knew perfectly well my relationship with Sumalee and that I was supposed to have killed her. Why hadn't Kulap mentioned it? Hadn't they told him or was there a plan behind all of this? From the tone of his voice, it seemed that he did know. Why had he waited for the two of us to be alone to ask me? Is that why he had such a dry

attitude towards me? What was clear was that the senior officials wanted me to prove once and for all my loyalty to the organization. That's why I had to be the one to kill her. The final test. Or maybe a punishment for the mistake of the previous mission. Most likely they believed that I tried to kill her, but unfortunately, she had somehow survived. Yes, it had to be like that. If they had the slightest doubt that it was a prepared plan, I would have already been dead. Now, I just had to finish the job I started. How was I going to get out of this? I couldn't kill her, but there didn't seem to be many ways out either. Either I did it, or they would surely kill me. Her or me... That was the decision.

I had to think of a plan, and I had to do it fast. The problem was, I couldn't think of any.

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