

Vortex

By Matt Carrell

CHAPTER ONE

When the rain stops...

Piruwat Angsorn ran a hand through his thick mop of greying hair and stared in awe at the seething chaos of Bangkok's traffic. Once again his eyes were drawn to the illuminated display perched high above the junction, ticking down the seconds until the lights changed. The clock turned from red to green three times, but the car was barely a hundred feet closer to the junction of Asoke and Sukhumvit Road. Only the green-jacketed motorbike taxi riders made any progress, along with the occasional *tuk-tuk* dodging from lane to lane, to speed an unwary tourist towards another gold shop or designer outlet. The passenger would be offered a once in a lifetime bargain and the driver, a healthy commission for delivering another eager punter. For most of the other travellers that night, patience was running short, but Piruwat couldn't have been happier. It gave him a little longer to luxuriate in the plush leather seat of the huge Toyota Land Cruiser, watching the city unfold in front of him. He'd never seen so many people before; his village was little more than a network of dirt tracks with fewer than thirty houses. This was his first visit to Thailand's distant capital.

Stroking the smooth wooden finish of the car's interior with rough calloused fingers, he eased himself still lower in the soft hide of his seat. Piruwat examined his cracked, dirty fingernails and the deep brown face reflected in the car window. The locals would pick him out in a second, as a farmer from the poor northeast of the country. A westerner might guess his fiftieth birthday was behind him but outdoor life had taken a heavy toll in Piruwat's thirty-seven years. The plaid shirt was new and the jeans were a passable copy of genuine Levis, but there could be no mistaking a man who made his living planting rice and tending tobacco plants.

"*Mai pen rai.*" Never mind... he chuckled to himself. Instinctively he stroked the amulet, the *Phra Kreuang* he picked up at his village market three weeks before. The vendor promised him

good luck and as Piruwat stared down at the face of the Buddha, he promised himself that the seller would share in his good fortune. Things were destined to change, the poem told him so and it had been right up to now.

Piruwat owned a Toyota too, but it was a thirty-year-old pickup truck and much of the vehicle had been replaced, more than once, with parts salvaged from the scrap yard. It got him to the market once a week, as long as he didn't push it too hard. That was the first thing on his wish list, a new truck, or at least a second hand one that still had its own documentation and hadn't been scavenged piece by piece. He'd have to spend a little on the house too, maybe an extra room for his two daughters, they were getting too old to share with their brother. There were so many things he could do with his newfound fortune, so many choices. He never had choices before.

Piruwat smiled again as he picked up the heavy crystal glass from the sleek wooden holder at the side of his seat. He raised the tumbler to his lips and took another sip of the iced Jack Daniels Black Label the driver poured for him as he got into the car. It couldn't have been more different to the harsh bite of his usual Songsam Thai whisky. He knew he'd never have a car like this one, but he might be able to treat himself to a decent bottle of *farang* liquor from time to time.

As the traffic ground to a halt once more, a face appeared at the window, a tiny girl who couldn't have been any older than his six year old daughter, Pim. The girl brushed her long black hair from her face with a thin, dirty hand and looked up at Piruwat with huge brown eyes. She offered one of the garlands many drivers hang over their rear view mirror for luck. Piruwat reached into his pocket to find some change but as he started to lower the window, the car eased forward and picked up pace. The young girl was left standing by the road, her expression unchanged. She often tapped on a hundred windows before anyone bought a garland. But she was already an old hand at the trade. As the Toyota pulled away, she stepped back onto the sidewalk and waited for the traffic lights to bring her the next batch of potential customers.

Piruwat settled back in his seat and stared out at the frantic, bustling streets of the city. Shoppers poured out of the vast Terminal 21 shopping centre, most heading for the Skytrain,

knowing a taxi would just have to take its place in the largely stationary traffic of Sukhumvit Road. The farmer took another long hit of the whisky. He was in no hurry, things never moved that fast in his village and he was determined to enjoy every second of his trip. The pedestrians looked gloomily at the sky and their pace quickened as they fled the humid streets like a single being, heading for the stairs and the air-conditioned sanctuary of the Skytrain line that runs the length of Sukhumvit Road. A few raindrops hit the window at Piruwat's cheek and he too stared at the darkening sky. He was new to the city, but no stranger to a Thai rainstorm. He could almost count down the seconds until the heavens opened and a wall of rain hit the street. The lights changed once more before the Toyota passed through, but by the time the car crossed the junction, water flowed inches deep in the gutter and passers-by fought to raise their umbrellas against the deluge. Piruwat was a good Buddhist, and would never take pleasure in the misfortune of others, but he knew he was a very lucky man. Sipping from the crystal glass, his hand closed over the precious slip of paper in his trouser pocket.

Three weeks had passed since the game. He went to the temple that day with offerings for the monks. Piruwat prayed and knelt in silent contemplation for nearly fifteen minutes. He picked up the small wooden container of *kau cim* sticks and thought about the question he wanted to ask. That night he'd be playing *Hi-Lo* with *Kuhn* Karapong and his friends and the farmer wanted to know if luck would be on his side. He shook the box gently until a stick fell to the ground. Painted crudely on its side, was a number that had never come up for him before and he was anxious to check its meaning. A smiling saffron-robed monk beckoned him towards the row of boxes where he would find the poem matching the number on the stick. The verse was short and simple.

"The spring is here, yet it still rains. When the rain stops, joy comes. The sun and moon gradually rise. The old gives way to the new. To see through this is like going through the Dragon gate. The God and Buddha aid you. "

Piruwat had driven his battered Toyota to the game that night, through a rainstorm just like the one now drenching the

streets of Bangkok. As he reached Karapong's house he saw that stone dragons guarded the stairway to the front door. The original part of the house was a traditional bamboo, stilt construction, raised to guard against flooding and to keep vermin from the living areas. Karapong had recently built a huge extension in modern style, including a vast terrace commanding a panoramic view of the valley below. Underneath was an air-conditioned garage for his brand new Mercedes.

Piruwat thought about how he could get to the door without being soaked to the skin. He decided to make a run for it... then the rain stopped. The dragons... the rain... there could be no doubt about the meaning of the stick, the poem could not have been clearer. When the rain stops, joy will follow.

Kuhn Karapong greeted each of his guests as though they were long-standing friends and a young girl was on hand to wash the feet of each of his visitors before they were ushered to the *sala* where the game would take place. There was plenty of beer, several bottles of Songsam and a selection of regional delicacies betraying the host's birthplace of Chiang Mai and his enormous appetite. The table was laden with *tord man plaa*, *sai kok* and *por pea gung*, easy snacks to eat without distracting the players from the game. Karapong eyed the food and the assembled gamblers as though he could not decide which to devour first.

Piruwat had few expectations of winning before his visit to the temple. He brought five hundred baht and his main concern was to ensure he got his fair share of food and whisky before his pockets were empty. As usual he started cautiously, with low stakes and simple bets, more often than not guessing correctly whether the combined total of the dice would be higher or lower than 7. With each roll of the dice he stroked his amulet and prayed for good luck. As his pile of cash grew, his confidence rose and he began to place more money on outcomes with higher odds. In less than two hours he started to believe the message of the sticks, he'd won four thousand baht and his luck was in. Had he left the table, it would have been disrespectful to the spirits who were smiling on him. More than that, he felt at one with the dice. As Karapong rattled them inside the wooden cup, Piruwat could see the dice turning and ricocheting off one another. As his host slapped the tumbler on the table, Piruwat felt his hands drawn to the bets he

should make. Occasionally he must have misinterpreted the spirits who guided him because Karapong would gratefully sweep his stake from the board. More often, and normally when he bet high, his host strained to look nonchalant as he paid out on a winning bet. Piruwat was embarrassed by his success, the pile of baht in front of him grew higher with each throw of the dice and his fellow players stared in awe. He placed higher stakes and chose more improbable bets, he was anxious his host should not lose face in his own home. To lose a little of his winnings would ensure both men could leave the table with honour intact. Yet the dice continued to fall for Piruwat.

As the clock struck midnight, the farmer sat with a little over twenty thousand baht at his elbow. The farm might generate such a sum in a month; he'd won it in just a few hours. The new day gave his host the opportunity to call a halt to the game and the players started to say their goodbyes. Piruwat had no idea how to deal with his good fortune. It would be disrespectful to offer a tip to his host but he was anxious to make some sort of gesture. Only as the local garage owner bade farewell did the idea strike him. The man handed Karapong some baht notes and received a slip of paper in return. Piruwat had forgotten that in addition to the *Hi-Lo* games, his host offered odds on the lottery. Not the official government version but the parallel underground lottery. Choose three digits that match the last three of the number drawn on TV twice a month and Karapong paid five hundred-to-one; choose two matching digits and the pay-out was still a healthy fifty-to-one. The farmer could make a gesture without embarrassing his host.

"May I play too?" he asked as the garage owner departed.

"With your luck *Kuhn* Angsorn, I think it would be better for me if you did not," Karapong replied.

"As you wish," Piruwat said, embarrassed by his clumsiness.

The older man smiled and gripped the farmer's shoulder.

"My little joke, I would be delighted to have the chance to win a little of my money back."

Piruwat relaxed and returned the man's smile.

"How many numbers, *Kuhn* Angsorn?"

"Three," the farmer replied.

"And your bet?"

Piruwat paused, “Two thousand,” he answered, reaching eagerly for the wad of notes in his trouser pocket.

The farmer took the paper Karapong offered and wrote the number 795 on one side. As his host returned the signed slip, he handed over two thousand baht. Honour was partly restored in Piruwat’s mind.

Piruwat barely thought about the ticket in the days that followed. He bought half a baht of gold, a little over a quarter of an ounce, with most of his winnings; it’s the Thai way of saving for a rainy day. Piruwat owed his brother two thousand baht since the previous harvest and the men shared a full bottle of Songsam to celebrate its repayment. His wife and children were able to replenish their threadbare wardrobes and the rest went into a small tin behind the hearth in their house with the lottery slip he received from Karapong.

Two weeks later, Piruwat saw Aiee; his neighbour’s daughter, running through the village. Twice a month she sold roughly copied sheets listing the winning lottery numbers. He paid the five baht, more as a kindness than because he wanted to check the numbers. Nonetheless he couldn’t resist taking a look. He ran to the house and frantically dug out the tin. His fingers trembled as he looked at the numbers again. The farmer’s mind raced and for a moment he thought maybe it was the first three numbers he needed to match not the last. The winning number was 876795. It was the last three on which he’d bet and Karapong owed him one million baht.

Piruwat drove to see Karapong without even telling his wife where he was going. He couldn’t bear to raise her hopes without confirmation of his luck. Karapong was waiting for him; he too had seen the numbers and knew the bet was won.

“*Kuhn* Angsorn, I am honoured to be visited by a man who is so clearly blessed by the spirits.”

Piruwat relaxed, since he’d expected the man to be hostile.

“*Kuhn* Karapong, it is I who am honoured.”

“My friend, I am pleased for your win and I am anxious to get you the money as quickly as possible. I have been in contact

with my partner who is in a position to pay you immediately. Will you be taking your family with you?"

"*Kuhn* Karapong, my family does not know about the ticket. My wife would have been angry if I told her about the wager. She will know nothing until I return with the money." He paused for a moment, confused by the question. "Taking them where?"

Karapong smiled and slapped the farmer on the back.

"You will be on the bus to Bangkok this afternoon but you must hurry. I will tell your wife you had to travel on urgent business. She will be thrilled when you return."

"Bangkok?"

"My partner is in Bangkok, we have never lost such a bet before. I am sure you understand we do not keep such a large amount in the village."

Piruwat smiled again and shook his host's hand. Of course, he should have thought about it. Who would keep a million baht in their house?

As promised the man was waiting at Mo Chit bus station in Bangkok, wearing a black suit and a red tie, exactly as Karapong described.

"*Kuhn* Angsorn?" he asked, without offering the traditional *wai* greeting one would expect from a chauffeur.

"I am Angsorn," Piruwat replied.

"*Kuhn* Karapong's partner has been detained in a meeting but looks forward to meeting you shortly. I have been instructed to take you to the Amari hotel in the city centre. There is excellent seafood and my employers were sure you would wish to celebrate."

Piruwat just wanted to get his cash and head back to his family, but the driver opened the door and gestured for him to get inside. Having poured his passenger a generous measure of whisky, the driver got back in the car and they began their slow progress through the streets of Bangkok. The poem came back to Piruwat... the old gave way to the new, just as it predicted. By the standards of the wealthy of Bangkok he was still a peasant, but soon he would be heading back to Isaan with one million baht in his pocket. He would not be boastful of his good fortune but gradually the other villagers would understand he was a man of means, a man to be respected. There are many things in Thailand that can win the

respect of one's peers, the most effective of course was money and soon the farmer would have a great deal of that.

The Toyota picked up pace, left the main road and headed east on a small *soi*. Piruwat turned to check he wasn't imagining things. As they passed a sign for the district of Klong Toey he noticed that once again they passed under an arch framed with dragons. The poem again... the old would give way to the new. Piruwat was in no doubt things would never be the same for his family, he'd never had such luck with *Hi-Lo* or the lottery, nor had he visited the capital of his country and it was certainly the first time he'd ever ridden in such a magnificent vehicle. He'd tasted JD Black Label before but, as he swirled the last of the amber liquid in the crystal glass, it occurred to him that it was usually a little clearer than this one. There'd been no strange white residue in the bottom of the glass. He wanted to ask the driver about that, and why they were now heading further from the main roads when the man had explained he was going to a city-centre hotel. He wanted to tap on the screen that separated him from his chauffeur but as he yawned, he couldn't summon the energy. His arms felt heavy, he could barely keep his eyes open and as the car drew to a halt on the dockside he drifted into a deep sleep.

Piruwat was right that life for his family would never be the same again, he was right that his luck had changed completely. The chauffeur opened the rear door and pulled the slumped body of the farmer from his seat. It was no real struggle to drag the man to the edge of the dock. It took a few seconds to go through his pockets, to find the once precious lottery ticket and the small fold of baht bills Piruwat had brought to Bangkok. The driver removed the farmer's watch and searched briefly, and in vain, for any other valuables. Satisfied that, should the body be recovered; it would look like a street robbery, there was only one thing to do before he dropped the limp body into the river. The driver pulled out his knife and drew it firmly across Piruwat's throat. It was a practiced move, the man knew exactly how the blood would spurt from the wound, and he was anxious not to soil his clothes. Seconds later, there was a splash and the driver returned to his seat in the Toyota.

Welcome to the firm

The rain had eased to a gentle warm drizzle by the time Prem Boonamee had navigated the final few kilometres of Bangkok traffic and arrived at the warehouse. Nonetheless, he was anxious to avoid the puddles as he stepped from the car in his expensive leather loafers. First he had to fumble for the electronic key card in the box under the dashboard. The alleyway was deserted but Boonamee was a careful man and checked in both directions before he slid the plastic card into the mechanism and keyed in the passcode. The door slid back and in seconds the car was in its space. Boonamee returned to the alley and hailed a motorbike taxi for the short ride to his apartment near the Park Lane mall in Ekamai.

The passcode was changed every month. It was Song's idea to match the latest six-digit code to the last set of numbers drawn for the state lottery.

"So lucky for some," he said as he gave Boonamee his latest assignment. "But not for others."

Boonamee's boss suffered from a mild obsession with the lottery. Unsurprising, as it was one of the reasons the two men made such a very good living. Four years passed since they met at the house of a mutual friend. Boonamee lamented to his neighbour that there was little money to be made selling air conditioning units and the man agreed to make the introduction to Song. The job sounded straightforward albeit with a small amount of risk.

Only a fraction of those who tune in twice a month to watch the government lottery draw have ever bought a ticket. The vast majority place their stake on the parallel underground lottery. Boonamee's job was simply to sell as many tickets as he could and pay the occasional winner when a gambler got lucky. He had to be wary of the police, the schemes are illegal, but he was comforted by the knowledge the local Chief took ten per-cent of the profits.

Song encouraged Boonamee to recruit a network of agents with whom he could split his commission. It took no time at all to realise sexy, outgoing girls were the best bet and in a matter of months, he had eight working for him. He'd slept with three of the girls but still needed to make a conscious effort to match a face

with a name when he went to collect their cash every week. Finding women was never a problem for Boonamee. At five feet ten he was tall for a Thai, his hair was always immaculately coiffed and he'd acquired a taste for genuine brand name suits, rather than the cheap copies many of his friends were obliged to buy. His bedroom wall was adorned with an original poster for the movie Bangkok Dangerous with Nicholas Cage. He'd watched it more than a dozen times and convinced himself he was the spitting image of the main Thai actor, Shahkrit Yamnarm. A steady stream of girls played along with his fantasy.

Pom was different. She'd worked at the petrol station where he filled his car and clearly ran the place. It never occurred to him she might be interested in him or in the line of work he could offer. He wasn't quite sure how he got that first date, he mentioned a restaurant across town and she said she'd always wanted to eat there. In a matter of days he was besotted, finding any excuse to drop by and see how she was doing. When she complained about how little she was paid at the petrol station, he told her about the lottery. Three weeks later she was his best selling agent. Life was sweet, the cash was rolling in and he'd fallen for the sexiest woman he'd ever met. It was obvious the first time they spent the night together that he was far from being Pom's first boyfriend. He suppressed the pangs of jealousy and enjoyed the fact that wherever they went, all eyes turned to watch his girlfriend. Prem Boonamee thought he was the luckiest man alive.

Pom sounded elated when she left the message that changed everything. He was in the shower and didn't hear the phone ring; otherwise he might have had the chance to talk to her one last time.

"Prem, it's me. I can't believe it but some of the tickets I sold have won big money. It's amazing, the guys are here now and they promised to give me a huge tip. Phone me back, they want to know when you will bring the cash. Please call me, this is so exciting."

Boonamee grabbed the folder with the bets for the month as he went on-line to check the winning number. As he found the site

and cursed the slowness of his connection, the phone rang again. It was no surprise when he saw the name on the screen.

“It’s Song,” said the familiar voice.

“Yeah, I saw that it was you.”

“Have you checked the numbers you sent me?”

“Doing it now,” replied Boonamee; still wrestling with the manila folder and cursing the spinning icon that told him the page was still loading. “Is there a problem?”

“Your girlfriend sold three winning tickets. How the fuck does that happen? If you hadn’t sent me the numbers before the draw I’d think you were cheating me.”

“What makes you think she’s my girlfriend? She’s just another sales agent.” Boonamee replied with panic rising in his gut.

“Don’t play me for a fool Prem. I know things about you, you don’t know yourself. I make it my business to know about the weaknesses of my associates.”

“Song, you know I didn’t cheat you. It’s simply bad luck... for us at least.”

“Prem, we don’t have bad luck. I can live with paying out a few thousand to those Isaan pigs you live amongst, but this is two million baht. Didn’t you read the small print, we don’t pay out sums like that.”

“What do you mean you don’t pay? The guys are sitting in her office at the petrol station.”

“Not my problem.”

“You’re going to walk away from it?”

“Of course, and you will too if you have any sense.”

“And leave her to it?”

“If she’s just another sales agent, why would you care?”

The voice taunted him now.

“I can’t do that.”

“Up to you. Prem, you are a valued employee, but there are plenty more where you came from. Dump the girl, get in that piece of shit you call a car and head for Bangkok. In three days time make sure you’re sitting at the outside terrace of the Bangkok Baking Company on the corner of Sukhumvit Soi Two at four in the afternoon. If you’re there, I have another job for you. If not, *chok dee kap*... good luck.”

“But... I can’t just...”

“Up to you. This phone is going in the river in thirty seconds, so unless you’re there in three days time, we won’t be speaking again. I suggest you do the same with yours.” The line went dead; Boonamee was left staring at the screen.

He had a pretty good idea how much Song made from the lottery and there was no need to walk away from a loss, however big. He did because he could. It was just another way of showing how powerful he’d become. As the main man in the syndicate, as far as Boonamee knew, Song was insulated from the people who bought the tickets. The only two people in the firing line were he and Pom. Only they were known to anyone locally. Had he been smarter, he’d have kept it all at arm’s length, but Pom was his girl and he’d shared a glass or two with a few lucky gamblers as he handed over ten or twenty thousand baht. Usually a winner picked up no more than a few hundred, having wagered fifty on guessing two correct numbers. He knew a big win was bound to happen sometime, but why did it have to happen to him... and Pom?

He couldn’t walk away from her, but if he stayed her problem would become his problem. The phone rang again... Pom. He let the message go to voicemail. For a second he thought about playing it back, but then pressed delete. Boonamee removed the battery and placed the phone on the floor. With two sharp strikes of a claw hammer it was in pieces at his feet. Boonamee picked up his car keys, pausing only to think of the quickest route to the main road and the highway to Bangkok.

Boonamee had gone to the Bangkok Baking Company coffee shop three days later as Song instructed. He sipped his coffee and waited. A girl in a traditional Thai outfit winked at him as she walked past, returning to work at the massage shop next door. Three sunburnt *farang* paused to ask for a light as they headed for the bars of Nana Plaza in the next *soi*, cursing him in a foreign language as he waved them away. A pretty young waitress buzzed around him, constantly checking whether there was anything else he needed.

His watch showed twenty past four when a motorcycle taxi rider appeared at his side.

“Prem Boonamee?”

“That’s me.”

“Who are you waiting for?”

“Song.”

The man dropped a small package on the table and turned away without another word. Inside was a pay-as-you-go mobile, with one number in the contacts list and one name - Song.

Three years had passed since he fled Korat. Boonamee owned a nice apartment and a Kawasaki motorbike, made use of Song’s fleet of expensive cars whenever he needed them and a procession of willing girls helped to keep him amused. Boonamee still thought often about Pom. For a few months his friends said she carried on working at the petrol station but then all of a sudden she disappeared. There was talk she went to work as a dancer in Pattaya. Sometimes he dreamt about her. She’d appear from nowhere... angry, he’d explain he had no choice; there was nothing he could have done to help her. After all, he could never have found two million baht. She carried on working for a while so she must have found a way out somehow. Now he could make it up to her, he had plenty of money. If she was still in debt, he could deal with that, she just needed to tell him how much and who he should pay. They could go back to the way it was before. The dream always ended the same way. She’d smile and step into his arms... that perfume, that mane of beautiful black hair, that soft, warm, supple body. It would envelope him and he’d collapse against her, so grateful to have another chance... a chance to put it all right. Then he stepped back to look at her, to tell her he loved her and that everything would be OK. That’s when he felt the sharp pain in his heart, that’s when he saw the knife. He’d clutch the gaping wound a centimetre below his rib cage and start to feel himself drifting away, he tried to cling on to consciousness but something told him it was over and then he’d hear a voice.

“Oh my Buddha, so much blood. I’ve never seen so much blood.”

When Boonamee woke from these dreams his body was bathed in sweat. Sometimes there’d be a girl in his room and he’d scream at her to leave, whatever the time of night. Then he sat and meditated until the terror subsided. More than three years passed

since he'd last seen Pom and the dreams were less frequent, maybe even a little less terrifying when they did occur. In his waking hours he still thought about seeing her again, maybe he could still put it right.

