



# SUMMALEE

STORIES FROM TRAKAUL

JAVIER SALAZAR CALLE



Javier Salazar Calle

**Sumalee**

«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

## **Calle J.**

Sumalee / J. Calle — «Tektime S.r.l.s.»,

A trip to Singapore to start a new life. Here, the protagonist will find hope, betrayal, pain, will live a torrid love story with a disconcerting woman. How does he end up in the hell of Bang Kwang, a Thai maximum security prison? What makes him become a completely different man, capable of the darkest atrocities? A captivating mafia, mystery and violence story that will carry you through waves of feelings and adventures that will grip you from the first page. A novel filled with emotions and a surprising ending that will leave no one indifferent. Sometimes life doesn't offer many options and those offered don't have to be the ones you are keen on. You don't even have to like them. Readers say... "Let yourself be captivated by Sumalee and Trakaul" "A surprising plot" "Addictive" "A pleasant surprise" "Intrigue, strength, romance and much more" "You won't want to stop reading" "I've been hooked from start to finish"

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Sumalee  
Stories from Trakaul  
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Cover Design © Marta Fernández García  
Illustrations @Elena Caro Puebla  
Photo of the author © Ignacio Insua  
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Original title: Sumalee. Stories from Trakaul  
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1st Edition (Revised)  
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Dedicated to Rachel, the best friend one could have.

Acknowledgements:

Antonio Fernández for contributing his extensive knowledge of Singapore and for reviewing the book, Josele González for the fantastic web page he made for me ([www.javiersalazarcalle.com](http://www.javiersalazarcalle.com)) and to all my other readers which made the book a lot better: my wife, Elena Caro; my sister, Pilar Salazar and my father, Jose Antonio.

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## Thailand 12

The first punch stunned me. The second knocked me to the ground. I got kicked for a couple of minutes. I tried to curl into a ball and cover my head as much as I could. One of them shouted laughing:

“You really know how to take a beating.”

When they got tired, they left the same way they came, walking calm and laughing. The crowd dissolved immediately and when I opened my eyes everything seemed normal around me, as if nothing had happened. Each inmate minding his own business. The silence law.

This wasn't the first time. They hit me over the marks of all previous beatings, bruises of a full range of colours and all stages of evolution. One of the beatings, a blow to the eye, left me with blurred vision for a couple of days but I ended up recovering. For two days I was convinced that I would be blind for the rest of my life. The thought was more frightening than the injury itself. In another one I got hit in the ear, I was dizzy for a week. My ribs were also damaged, I did not know if broken, and I had pain of all kinds in every part of the body. It reminded me of my young days when I was doing silly things and ended up in some sort of fight every day. I learnt that protecting my head was fundamental. The rest would heal; better or worse, but it healed. The scariest thing in all of this, the most humiliating thing was to see how the prison guards were spectators of the many beatings from a distance. They even laughed and made bets. On what, I did not know, because I could only focus on wishing they finish the beating fast. Perhaps on whether that was the beating that would kill me.

I tried to get up, but a sharp pain in the chest stopped me. There, on the floor of the corridor, kneeling, I tried to open my mouth as wide as possible to get the maximum amount of air to ease the feeling of distress, of asphyxiation. I focused on breathing slowly and deeply, but I couldn't. It took me a while to lower my heart rate and for my breath to return to a relative normal. With a tremendous effort I got up and wobbling, leaning on the walls and dodging other prisoners who ignored me, I got to my cell. Mine and of forty more inmates.

Once there I sat on the mat and I stayed there quiet for some time, trying to clear my mind and isolate myself from everything around me, including the pain that was running through my entire body. A body that screamed to lie down and not get up for hours, but I knew I could not do that. I knew it. My survival depended on it. I did what needed to be done. What was necessary. I got up and started my workout routine. Stretches, push-ups, sit ups ... Working every part of the body independently as well as together. The pain was almost unbearable, but I certainly did not stop; although I wept silently, wetting the floor with my tears. I could never show weakness. If I wanted to survive, if I wanted to someday get out of there without it being in the sad cardboard coffin they used, I had to continue. I finished the training with both movements I had learnt from my former boxing coach as well as imitating the prisoners who trained in Muay Thai in the courtyard, learning to fight like them, with the difference that they were doing it in front of everyone, in broad day light, and I just trained when nobody saw me. Away from curious eyes. Preparing in the shadows.

Someday, which I hoped it would be soon, I will feel prepared and I would not limit myself to trying to minimize the damage of the blows, but I would respond in a brutal manner, accurate and without compassion. Killing if it was necessary. Yes, I would kill without hesitation. That day I would earn their respect and this nightmare I was living would end. Yes, I had to be sure to win, because if I stood up against them and did not succeed, they would kill me without a doubt. That much was certain. Meanwhile, I had to be patient and try to keep myself alive and without any irreparable damage.

I had visualized that moment in my head thousands of times. With a thousand variants, with different endings, in all kinds of scenarios, trying to anticipate every possibility. Soon, very soon, my time would come. Or die.

But how did I end up in this situation if a few weeks ago I was David, an uninspired computer geek in the offices of a financial institution in Madrid? What circumstances had pushed me into this unthinkable situation not long ago?

While fighting against suffering, as I continued with the ordeal of training, I was reflecting on the dire circumstances experienced. The ones which pushed me from a quiet life in the IT department of a bank to preparing to kill the garbage that abused me constantly in the dreaded prison of Bang Kwang, seven kilometres north of Bangkok, Thailand. One of the most dangerous prisons in the world. The pit of damnation in which I found myself. My end if I was not able to invent a way to save myself.

## Singapore 1

A few weeks prior...

It took me a few tries to turn off the alarm. On the second try I almost knocked it off the nightstand. I sat on the edge of the bed and stretched my arms as I took a long yawn. Another day of work. Like a robot, driven by the routine, I ate breakfast, showered, and dressed. Forty minutes later I was starting the car.

On the way to work I reflected on my last months. Marked by the breakup from my long-time girlfriend, I had not managed to recover yet. After seven years it seems she got tired of me and left me for a supposed friend to whom I introduced her myself and with whom she was actually having an affair for a long time. I was blind all this time without seeing what others had warned me. Ever since I walked around like a lost soul, always blue and sad. Devastated. I had taken refuge in boxing, practising it several times a week. I was hitting the boxing bag as if that adrenaline were able to give me back my life. In addition, I did not like at all the project I was working on at the bank. I was doing testing all day, with a boring tool and noting down the results in a standardized document. Result correct, result incorrect, incidence. Sometimes I looked out the window of the fourth floor, where my desk was, and I felt like throwing myself from it. Figuratively, of course. I have never thought of something as drastic as suicide. I was sad, not destroyed. Result correct, result incorrect, incidence.

What I did not know was that that day my life would change forever. So much so like I had never imagined.

After half an hour's drive and a round to find where to park, I arrived at my desk. I turned on the computer and went to greet a co-worker. Once back I quickly reviewed, like every morning, my email. Same thing just like all days: tests, tests, test results, questions about the tests, test requests, test reports and forecasting tests. Only one email was different from the rest. It was from my boss, sent the evening prior, asking me to call him to talk to me about something. I had no idea what it could be, but whatever it was, hopefully I could do something different, even if it were for five minutes, I would welcome it. I looked at the time. Half past 9. Perfect. I picked up the work cell phone, I looked for Valentine and called him.

“Yes, tell me.” Said Valentine.

“Hi Valentine. It's David. I have just read your email and I'm calling to see what it is that you wanted to tell me.”

“Good morning David. How are you?”

“Bored. The project that you gave me is going to kill me. Tell me that you have something for me? I need a change.”

“I might possibly have. What do you know about Singapore?”

“Singapore?” He got my attention. I got up and went to a nearby meeting room that was empty. “Well... I don't know Valentine. A small country in Asia, with a good standard of living, very civilized, they speak Chinese and English ...”

“That's where I wanted to get!” Yelled Valentine. “They speak English, just like you.”

Yes, I was bilingual. My mother was American. She fell in love with my father and came to live and work in Spain. A few years after I was born, my father disappeared without saying anything and we never heard of him. Everyone thought he had abandoned my mother, but she always believed that something had happened to him because they were madly in love. In any case, I grew up without a father from the age of two, which influenced my childhood and adolescence, and I spoke English since.

“What do you propose then?”

“David, a six months project has emerged in Singapore, which can possibly extend to two years, for which you are a perfect fit due to your knowledge and language. I know it is a bit hasty, but I

need you to tell me sometime today or tomorrow because it is urgent to start moving the paperwork.” I raised my eyebrows excited. “I’ll send you all the project information and the conditions. Call me if you have any questions. What do you think?”

“I don’t know what to tell you Valentine. You cough me a bit off guard ...”

“I know, I know. Think about it and tell me tomorrow. Were you not sick of doing testing? Here’s your chance. And if you do it well it will help you with a potential promotion this year. I’ll send you the email, you think about it and let me know tomorrow. Hey! If I didn’t think that you were perfect for it, I would have not told you.”

“Alright, alright. I’ll let you know tomorrow. In any case, thanks for thinking of me.”

After hanging up I remained thinking. When I got to my desk, I already had the email from Valentine. It was clear that he was in a hurry. I opened it and read all the information. Interesting project, a country with incredible references, good pay including housing and, above all, getting out of here for some time away from the memory of my ex and the damn tests. It was clear. Within five minutes of receiving the call I knew what my decision was. Still, I decided to wait until the next day to give my brain the opportunity to think about it, although, when I took a decision, and I used to do it quickly, I rarely changed my mind. When I got home, the only thing I did was to check my passport’s expiry date.

What I would really miss would be all the sports I was doing: running, basketball, soccer, paddle tennis, climbing ... I was passionate about everything that required effort or risk, especially if it was outdoors. On the other hand, in Singapore I could do water sports which in Madrid I could only do in the summer, such as diving, sailing or riding jet skis. Living on an island gave me the opportunity of doing it all the time. I got back to work. Result correct, result incorrect, incidence.

Next day, at noon, I called Valentin and told him my decision. I will go to Singapore. He sent me all the trip details and started moving all documentation. Personalized Employment Pass, EntrePass, Work Permit... There were lots of options and types of visas. In the end, it turned out that what I needed was a Work Permit. For this type of pass it was the company who had to request it on behalf of the candidate, but I had to translate my academic qualifications (although later in Singapore I had to get the original certified by an official translator there and wait until they were approved by the Ministry of Labour), fill out forms for the health insurance, passport photocopies, the work report from my company ... The fact that it wasn’t a new job but a transfer with the company and that the company took care of almost all the procedures made the process much simpler.

A couple of weeks later I was at the airport in Barajas catching a flight with Qatar Airways to Singapore. The rest of the team was already there for a couple of weeks preparing to launch the project and reading documents. The company was paying for a three-bedroom apartment shared with two co-workers, so I didn’t have to worry about finding a place to live and I had the opportunity to meet people from day one.

I bought a travel book about the country and read it during the flight. I did not lack time, sixteen hours with a stopover in Qatar. Lots of patience required.

The book began with the typical presentation of the history of the place. Apparently, Singapore was a city-state that passed from hand to hand and where now lived a jumble of races with unique languages. In fact, there were four official languages: English, Malay, Tamil, and Mandarin Chinese. Two more than I thought.

What mattered to me was that it was the fourth largest financial centre in the world (after New York, London, and Tokyo) and the fifth most important commercial port given its strategic location. On paper, almost a paradise on earth and an unparalleled career opportunity. To be proved once there. At least, it looked promising. The book was full of all kinds of information that I enjoyed. I loved numbers and trivia about anything. I immersed myself in reading trying to absorb as a good tourist, all relevant information.

Finally, they announced that we were arriving in Singapore. An airport built on the sea. I was glued to the window to see it well. Below me I could see the whole agglomeration of the city, but I was pleasantly surprised by the number of trees. I hated the places where the only visible colour was that of cement. The airport was in a corner of the island and just below it a large naval port was visible. The sea around it was studded with boats of all sizes, but especially those giant ones that carry containers. I've never seen so many together and so organized, forming long parallel lines of ships. The city was full of skyscrapers and tall buildings. The edges of the island had long beaches with dense vegetation. Then I saw an area with houses, a suburban development which ran to the side of a wide river with many bridges.

The plane was flying very low over a grassy well-maintained area and I could see appear the track just below the left wing, where I was. I suddenly felt the blow of the landing gear touching the ground and the plane began to slow down. At the end, a few hundred meters away, was written with shrubs the airport name: Changi.

The plane exited the runway and headed for the terminal. From my side I could not see it, but I could see it through the windows on the other side. The stewardess announced over the loudspeakers, among other things, that the temperature was twenty degrees. Being in an equatorial zone, temperatures tended to be around that figure with high humidity and short but intense rain.

Before long we were allowed to get up and grab our luggage. I walked around the airport with one suitcase and a backpack on my shoulder. There were strange things compared to what I was used to see, areas with free internet and even laptops for those who did not have one. There was also a relaxation area with chairs, like those by the pool, facing the planes and where people were listening to music, sleeping, or reading.

I kept going in search of the train platform. The screens announced arrivals and departures from all over the world. Finally, I arrived. I took a streetcar named Skytrain that took you to Terminal 2, where you could get a taxi. When the train stopped at the platform it caught my attention the fact that it didn't have a driver. Soon it left me in Terminal 2. In the middle there was a tropical garden with a small pond and beautiful flowers. Free massage chairs, hanging crystal tears rising and falling, orange fish ponds, places to receive Asian massages... They even advertised a pool in Terminal 1 from which, according to the photos, you could see the runway! Incredible. In the bathrooms there were touch pads where you could click on a smiley to rate the cleanliness of the bathroom. Of course, it was spotless. After all it was considered one of the best airports in the world. The first impression of a new person in the city was its airport and here they nailed it.

I finally got out and took a taxi. I showed him a paper with the address of my new home, and he headed there. I arrived on a Saturday and the company informed me that the house mates were expecting me at home to help me settle a bit and tell me everything I needed to know to adapt as fast as possible. There was no way to mistaken the place because it was called The Spanish Village... *Pueblo español* in the language of Cervantes. Curious place to put a group of Spanish. I don't know if it was a coincidence or it was on purpose, but the name was perfect to make you feel like home. I looked it up on the internet and it was in the neighbourhood of Tanglin, but that, for now, it meant nothing to me.

My journey in Singapore was starting.

## Singapore 2

In less than half an hour, the taxi stopped in front of the entrance of a building complex and the driver told me that this was the address on the paper. I looked and saw at the right of the entrance Spanish Village 56-88 Farrer Road and the same thing in what I assumed were Chinese characters. After exchanging a few words with the guard at the gate, he entered the complex and stopped. I paid with Singapore dollars I had brought from Spain and I watched him drive away.

I looked again at the paper where I had the address. I was in the right place. I started walking with all my luggage looking for the door. The complex was made up of a group of beige buildings with red tiled terraces. They were four storeys high including the ground floor forming the shape of an ellipse. In the centre there was a fairly large pool, a playground, parking, two tennis courts, a barbecue area ... It was clear that here the developments were perfect, not like the sad apartment in which I lived while looking for a better home to live with my ex. My ex, Cristina. She was now thousands of kilometres away from me and, although there were times when I felt her painfully close, even with frightening intensity, I had to forget her. I was so tired of so much sorrow, self-pity, and misery, I had to get back to enjoying life. I wanted to go back to being the crazy David from before I met her; unvarnished, uncompromising, not having to answer to anyone. To meet many women and enjoy with no strings attached.

While I was looking for the building, I was intercepted by a man with Asian features who asked me in a very strange English where I was going. I assumed it was someone from maintenance or the likes. I told him I was a new tenant and gave him the address. That seemed to reassure him. We shook hands and with a grin on his face he walked me to the door of my building helping me with a suitcase. He called my apartment, and someone answered, a voice that was familiar, he said that the new tenant had arrived. I stopped a moment to think about how smart he was, not questioning me, but rather accompanying me to the door to confirm my information with my roommates. When the voice confirmed that I was expected, he was satisfied, he said goodbye and I went into what would be my new home for at least the next six months. Or so I thought.

I rang the doorbell and pushed the door. I was surprised. I thought I recognized the voice of Josele, a co-worker, a friend with whom I worked side by side for three years. When we finished, he ended up in a project in the United States along with another co-worker from the bank. We hit it off from the beginning and we got along very well. I was sad when the project was over and we had to part ways, but we maintained regular contact and always met when he was in Spain.

At the door of the apartment, as I had suspected, Josele was waiting for me. He had not changed at all, he still had that hair that he grew like a toupee, a bad imitation of Elvis Presley. I left my suitcase and backpack on the floor and hugged him effusively.

“Josele, is it you?”

“Surprise! Come in and we will tell you. Look who's here”, he said opening the door wide.

“Damaso!”

I ran and hugged him lifting him into the air. Damaso was another fellow that the company had sent with Josele to the United States. A little quirky, but a familiar face in the end. The day could have not started better having these two characters as roommates.

“But what are you doing here? Were you not in America?”

“Yes, I was,” said Damaso. “The project ended and we both got sent here recently. Valentine told us you were coming, but we didn't say anything because we wanted to surprise you.”

“And what a surprise, boys! It really can't get any better. Together again and this time sharing an apartment. Singapore gets ready!”

“Yes!” Josele shouted excited. “We can play sports again together. Damaso and I go jogging twice a week and we are in a basketball league for expatriates. We've already entered you in the team.”

“Great!” I replied. “At least I will not get fat and I will meet new people. Well, tell me. What is life like here?”

“Tere and Diego are also here,” said Damaso.

“Them too! That's great, the whole gang together again. I didn't think we would work together on a project again.”

“Yes, and we know something you don't ...”

“I suppose, it is the fact that Diego is also on the basketball team.”

“Yes. But it's not that.”

“What is it then?”

“They're together.”

“What! Tere and Diego? Since when?”

“Well, we do not know because they have just told us, but certainly since before coming here, so at least two months.”

“I had never suspected it; although, in fact, if you think about it, yes they are very compatible given the way they are. Good for them! So, what do we do now?”

Josele and Damaso first showed me around the apartment. It had three bedrooms and two bathrooms. I was going to share the bathroom with Josele. Apparently, Damaso insisted on having one for himself and Josele didn't care. The living room and kitchen were spacious. The house had Wi-Fi and a closed terrace from where you could see the pool. They also told me that the complex had 24-hour security. The man who had intercepted me in the garden was of Chinese origin and was called Nan Shao and was the maintenance person during the day. At night there was a Malay named Datuk Musa. There was also a gym, sauna and squash courts on the ground floor, and a garden with several barbecues, which I had seen a moment ago, where you could have a picnic without leaving the building. Although there was a big TV in the living room, each room had a small one as well as air conditioning, a desk with a chair and a large closet. I didn't know if the rest of the people in this country identical houses have, but the standard of living here looked amazing. We had two shopping centres within twenty minutes' walk; with all kinds of restaurants, food and clothing shops, banks, and places to have fun. Wow, our location was perfect.

They also told me about transportation in the city. The subway was called MRT and it had four lines across Singapore from North to South and from East to West. There were also buses and the use of taxi was common, as it was quite cheap. The company had given me a mixed transport card that I could use for both the MRT and the buses. Our company offices were by the Singapore River estuary and close to a large urban park called Fort Canning Park. We could get there by bus. There was a direct line than in less than forty minutes got us to the office.

Working hours were in spurts, like everywhere else. The normal thing in Singapore was to work forty-four hours a week and to have fourteen days of vacation, although us, fortunately, kept the holidays from Spain. The work culture in Singapore was completely different than that of Spain. I don't think that in Spain we would be able to have a forty-four-hour work week and only two weeks of vacation.

Josele gave me a bag with a box inside.

“What is this?”

“A gift from the company. It's your corporate phone for Singapore. Inside you'll find the phone, the SIM card, and the instructions to connect to all the apps in the company, although, in reality, the only useful one is the email. Monday at work they'll give you your laptop.”

“OK, thank you very much. Later you can explain to me the tariffs and calls to Spain. What about eating? How do you do it? From the menu? In restaurants like in Spain?”

“Well, there are a lot of options,” Josele replied. “It's very rare to find people eating in restaurants because they're so expensive. The norm here is to eat in the canteens of the office building,

in the *hawker* centres, which are kitchen groups with a small counter that share an eating area or in the coffee shops which are like the *hawkers*, but more expensive and beautiful...”

“And with air conditioning!” Damaso interrupted. “It's where we usually eat.”

“Yes, yes, and with air conditioning,” Josele continued. “Because Damaso can't take the heat and humidity. In any of these places you can both eat and buy food to go. That depends on everyone and whether there is room to sit, because sometimes there are no sits due to the large number of people there. Also, quite crowded are the fast-food restaurants type Burger King, McDonald's or other Asian food chains that don't exist in Spain. There are also people who bring their own food, but it's very rare to see Westerners doing that. People from Bangladesh or the Philippines do it usually because they like to eat their traditional food and cook it themselves...”

“Good, good,” I cut him off laughing. “I've only asked where you usually eat, not to give me a report on the Singapore society and their eating habits. What a detailed response. It gave me time to set up the phone. Wait a minute, I'm going to call my mother.”

“Say hello from us.” They both said at the same time.

They knew her from when we worked together in Madrid and one day they came for dinner. My mother is an excellent cook. She became passionate about Spanish food and loved to have guests. She had had a stormy youth, so to speak, and was delighted to welcome new friends who, at first glance, seemed like good people; nothing to do with the unrecommended friendships of my adolescence. I took advantage of the company phone to call to tell her that I was all settled and that I was again with my soul friends. She was very glad I wasn't alone and that I knew people here. She sent them both many kisses. I promised to call and talk more in a few days. When I hung up, I kept asking about things I was interested in knowing about the place.

“And, to entertain yourself, what do you do around here? I don't need you to tell me everything there is to know about the city today, OK, Josele? You must have some fun, too, anything worth mentioning?”

“A lot of things,” Damaso replied. “In Singapore you're not going to get bored, that's for sure. There are all kinds of activities: from amazing flight simulators, horse racing, casinos, amusement parks, hiking trails, museums, shopping malls and, of course, hundreds of pubs and clubs where you can go out and meet people, especially a girl after what Cristina did to you.” My face showed how much I agreed with the latter. I felt like getting back to my crazy times, when what mattered was to end up with a girl no matter who. “Close to work, on the other side of the park, is one of the main strips. A street called Mohamed Sultan Road which is full of clubs and discos. Twenty minutes' walk. And there's also golf across Marina Bay, of course!”

“I was wondering when you were gonna mention golf. I'm sure you looked into it before you even got here. How to become a member of a golf club around here and where to buy bread in the mornings.” I laughed.

“Do you have any idea what it feels like to shoot a hole in one? Neither do I, but I keep trying.”

“You know him so well David,” Josele said laughing. “As soon as he arrived, he asked the taxi driver on his way from the airport. And once a year they have Formula 1 races, of course. I think it's in September and we were told that it's amazing, because they race around the city at night; so, if we get a chance we should go, even if you don't like races very much, because the atmosphere alone I think it's worth it.”

“But how long have you been here? You had time to do all these things?”

“No, man,” Josele laughed. The bars yes, of course; but the rest of the things we were told about by colleagues who have been here longer. Now that you're here, I'm sure we'll move more.”

“Man, I also hope to get out a little, too. Especially if it's in good company.”

“Do you mean us or some pretty girl?”

We all laughed hard. It was clear that the entire time they were in the United States we had not lost the complicity we always had in our projects together in Spain. Especially with Josele.

Good times were on the way.

## Singapore 3

Next day we went out together for a walk around town. I really wanted to see the atmosphere of the country.

As I wanted to feel useful, I took the garbage bags to throw them away, but Josele intercepted me at the door.

“Where are you going with the garbage?”

“To throw it away. I saw a container out there.”

“My God, we have to explain everything to you. Here there are garbage treatment facilities on every block. You throw the trash down the kitchen chute, under the microwave, and it goes where it’s supposed to go. Like the pneumatic waste in Spain.”

“Interesting... and those on the main floors?”

“They leave it at the service door, and it gets picked up by the cleaning staff. No one takes their trash to the dumpster.”

“And they recycle?”

“There are containers for recycling if you want, but almost no one does it.”

“I see. All the trash down the kitchen chute.”

I threw both bags, and we went out. We started with our neighbourhood, Tanglin. The Singaporeans I saw on the street seemed mostly of eastern origin, Chinese, especially, although there were also many Indians and quite a few whose origin I could not identify.

“They are Malaysian,” clarified Josele. “Here people are quieter and more closed off than the Europeans. They also have very strict laws. There are countless prohibitions. Some can be shocking to us, and if you fail to follow them, you will be punished without hesitation. Everyone learns fast to be respectful, the easy way or the hard way.”

“I like that.”

“We already knew that. With how rigid you are....”

It was true that I was, but it hadn't always been that way.

We went to the right, leaving behind a pedestrian walkway covered with plants full of purple flowers. After a short while we arrived at a subway station. The type of construction changed, and single-family houses appeared, as if it were an area of semi-detached houses, but each different from the other, both in materials and design. A little further there was a junction with another important street called Bukit Timah which was parallel to a stream and had an elevated bridge.

“On the left is the mall we told you about, Coronation Shopping Plaza,” Josele said. “On the right the botanical gardens.”

“Let’s go right then, we will have plenty of time to see shops,” I replied.

We continued until we reached the main entrance of the botanical park or at least one of the entrances. None of them knew how many there were. I read out of curiosity the information to enter. It was opened from five in the morning to twelve at night every day of the year! In addition, it was free except for the orchids area. That was definitely good public service.

“Why don't we go in?” I said trying to persuade Josele and Damaso to go in and have a look.

“We have plenty of time to see things more thoroughly. For your first day it would be better to get familiar with the rest of the city. Besides, Josele already visited the gardens,” Damaso said.

“Is it true?”

“Of course,” Josele replied immediately. “Make no mistake. I might like to take cool pictures of flowers, but there was more to it. I came on a date with a Japanese woman that was really hot, and I thought bringing her here was going to lead to a sure success. And it sure was.” He winked at us and we laughed.

Truth was that he was absolutely right. There was plenty of time to see everything, so I gave in without complaining too much.

“Look!” Damaso shouted. The bus is coming, we could go see Little India, the Indian quarter of the city.

Josele and I thought it was a good idea and in thirty minutes we were getting off the bus in a whole different neighbourhood. There the demographic distribution took a total turn, with the majority being Indian (or Bangladeshi, because the truth is that I was incapable of differentiating them). The first thing that struck me was that in a park there were hundreds of them sitting on the ground, in small groups, chatting with each other. My friends told me that it was what they did every Sunday. It was their meeting point to talk about what had happened during the week. That said, there was not one single woman. Only men. Interesting. Was it because of their customs, machismo or women were meeting somewhere else? We kept walking until we arrived at a church where a group of Foochow Methodist were praying at the entrance, which surprised me considering we were in an Indian area and one expects to see Hindu temples. This demonstrated the uniqueness of this place. We also saw restaurants, these yes, Indian and, finally, we arrived at the Mustafa Centre. It was a fairly large shopping mall that was open 24 hours. Across from it there were two-storey houses, majority of them had restaurants, jewellery stores and Hindi schools. There was also a temple called Arya Samaj. This one did look Hindu, but I wasn't sure. The entrance had a poster with two men: one bearded with a kind look and the other with a turban and a saint like halo. At both ends of the street you could see the city's skyscrapers, which contrasted with this low area of houses. Everything was very different from what I knew.

Josele, who had always been more curious about things and who, in addition, was fond of photography and was always looking for unique locations to unleash his vocation, explained to me that these houses were called shop houses. They were old buildings with the upper floor intended as residence and the lower one for the family business, usually workshops, restaurants, or shops. Apparently, they were highly sought after, not only for their historical value or their beauty, but also for their exceptional location. They rented for three thousand five hundred up to almost twenty thousand dollars a month, depending on their location and condition; and their sale price was several million Singapore dollars. A fortune.

We went into the mall to see what kind of stores they had. It was over two blocks and on the first floor it had a glass walkway above the street that linked the two buildings. Inside there were shops of all kinds: a supermarket, a pharmacy, cosmetics, sportswear, electronics, post office and jewellery stores. They also had visa services for Indians and Malays and a currency exchange office. One euro amounted to almost one and half Singapore dollar. I had gotten a slightly better rate in Spain.

At lunchtime we ate at one of the many Indian restaurants in the area. One specialized in northern Indian food. Like I could tell the difference between the food from the north and that from the south! I went along with the advice of Josele and Damaso and we ordered several dishes to share. For starter *Aloo Gobi*, which were spiced potatoes with cauliflower, and *Chaat*, a type of very crispy dumplings with various spicy fillings. Then we shared *Chana masala*, which looked similar to a Spanish dish but had a completely different flavour due to the spices, a rice with lentils called *Khichdi* and chicken *Tandori*, a roast chicken with yogurt and spices that gave it a bright red colour. All accompanied by a bread called *Kulcha* and for dessert some rose petals with sugar called *Gulqand*. Lots of exotic names and food that sometimes was a bit too spicy. I could eat it once in a while but every day I would end up fed up with so much spice. Besides, I wasn't quite sure that my stomach could take it on a daily basis since it was used to a different kind of food. What I was sure of was that I wouldn't remember the name of any of the dishes.

I asked about the typical Singaporean food and I was told it was also very spicy, but to not worry about it because there were all kinds of restaurants to choose from. I liked spicy food, but only once in a while and not too spicy. I had a friend who liked hot food, but to me it seemed that with

the mouth on fire you couldn't really taste the flavour of the food. Anyway, there was also a lot of Chinese influence in their food, which I liked a lot better. I had to try it soon.

After lunch we returned home. I had to finish unpacking and I wanted to get some rest. I didn't know if it was jet lag or what, but I was exhausted. Anyway, I had received so much information since I arrived in the city and I really wanted a little peace and to plan for the next day and to get into some routine.

We spent the rest of the afternoon at home, watching some English news on TV and chatting about the things we would do in the coming weeks.

We had dinner from what we had in the fridge and shortly I went to sleep. Next day I was starting my new work adventure.

## Thailand 13

My thoughts about my stay in Singapore were interrupted when I felt that someone was watching me. I stopped the series of punches I was doing and looked at the cell door. A man named Channarong was looking at me weird. I had heard of him from other prisoners that talked about him, always with respect. His name, as I had been told, meant something like "fighting to win," which was exactly what I was preparing for. I wasn't quite sure why people respected him. I didn't know if he were a member of a mob, a famous fighter or the son of a rich businessman who could pay someone to kill you if you bothered his offspring. The thing was, he had been staring at me quietly for who knows how long. I tried to pretend by stretching my arms and making some stupid moves trying to imitate what in my head would be Tai Chi. I was sure it was too late and that Channarong could tell that I was training in martial arts. He would have to be stupid to believe that what I was doing was Tai Chi.

I felt ridiculous trying to throw him off, so I stopped and stared at him without saying anything. Channarong fixed his eyes in mine and examined me closely. His face was completely blank. It was impossible to know what he was thinking. After a few minutes, which seemed like hours, he took a few steps toward me. Instinctively, I stepped back and raised my arms to defend myself. I was used to all who came near to hit me although this time it was a bit soon considering the last beating was just an hour ago.

Channarong came within twenty inches of me and looked at me funny. He raised his hand and I shrugged waiting to take the first hit, but instead, what he did was grab my arm and stretch it imitating a punch.

"Not like this," he said in a pretty decent English as he shook his head. "Not like that. No, no, no."

He grabbed my arm and stretched it again, this time with more force. Forcing me to turn on my hip so I don't fall.

"Move hip, hit hip. Move hip, hit hip. Do you know what to call this prison? The Big Tiger because they say, "it hunts and eats." Want to be prey or hunter?"

He kept repeating that phrase as if it were a mantra, over and over again, as he moved my arm and patted me on the waist. He was correcting my movement! Not only did he not want to hit me, he was teaching me to hit the right way. He let go of my arm and encouraged me with a hand gesture to keep trying. I threw a new series of punches using my hip in the punches as Channarong corrected my movements.

"Muay Thai's tenth lesson," he told me very serious after a while-training and exercising regularly. "You continue, I watch. Very good. Muay Thai are eight-armed warriors. Fists, elbows, knees, and feet. Train everything, look for balance."

So, he had been watching me training without me knowing. It was clear that I wasn't hiding it as well as I thought. Just a minute! Did he say tenth lesson? What about the previous nine? Anyway, I did another series of punches focusing on doing everything perfect, as he taught me, paying attention to every detail of the movement, trying to not allow the pain in my body to influence me. I turned satisfied to see what he thought, but Channarong had already left. He disappeared the same way he showed up. Quietly and without warning. It left me puzzled. Why was he helping me, why did he leave without giving me the opportunity to thank him? I didn't know the answers or had the chance to get them at the time, so I did what was expected of someone practical like me. I kept training my punches, using my hip to hit harder. Trying to ignore the pain caused by every move in the places where I was hit in the beating.

Next day I looked for Channarong to thank him, but I couldn't find him. I also did not go searching the entire complex, because with my background it was better not to be seen too much to avoid problems. When you were used as a punching bag, the wisest thing to do was not to be found.

I kept training my punches and the rest of the moves. I would have loved it if he decides to be my mentor as Mr. Miyagi in the Karate Kid or as Angel, the boxing teacher who taught me what respect for others and myself was, but I doubted that this so loved man and with whom I had never talked had any interest in me. On the other hand, he had helped me, hadn't he? In any case no one ever spoke to me; so, I felt grateful at least for that.

A couple of days later I met Channarong in the cafeteria line. I approached to thank him for his interest, but he sent me away from him with rapid hand movements and a snake-like sound.

“Lesson number two” - screamed as I walked away confused, “to make oneself useful to others.”

While eating, I tried to unravel the meaning of those words. Did he want me to help people in the prison, did he want me to think of myself? Eastern people sometimes liked to talk like this. Was it not easier to say what you meant? Make oneself useful to others... to defend others from thugs instead of myself? Cheap philosophy. With how useful it is to say things directly. I looked toward Channarong and he was pointing toward my table and telling something to his teammates, who were laughing hard. I didn't know what to think anymore. I was completely lost. Maybe he was just laughing at me, but then why help me?

I noticed that the group that had it in for me was coming into the cafeteria, so I got up, left the tray with everything I had left to eat and exited quickly. As my mother would say, “Whoever avoids the occasion avoids danger.” That was useful advice. And... of course.

I went to the cell to train. It's not that training after eating was a good idea, but it was one of the few times when no one was there, and I had to take advantage of it. I did what needed to be done. What was necessary. I started my workout routine. Stretches, push ups, sit ups ... Working every part of the body independently and together. Then I continued with the blows in the air, first punches, then kicks, finally, knees and elbows like I saw the prisoners training in the yard. As Channarong said, the eight-armed warrior. As no one spoke to me for fear of also becoming the target of those who beat me, I had a lot of time to think. In one of my daily reflections, I had considered that, apart from building up my body and trying to improve my technique and my speed, I should also condition my body to blows. Which is why I added to my routine a series of punches with fists, elbows, tibia and back of the hand to the wall covering myself first with pieces of fabric and starting gently. Sometimes I exaggerated with the blows and I had some part of my body inflamed for a couple of days, but I considered it necessary to teach my body to overcome pain. When I was messing up in training, I only had to remember one of my antagonistic enemies from youth or any of the beatings received; me on the ground being the target of kicks and punches, crouched like an animal and waiting for it to all to end. Like this I increased the momentum of my blows, the effort of training drawing forces from fury, fear, and the intensity of despair.

I also had to greatly increase my stamina, so I spent my time running non-stop in the yard; which my stalkers celebrated with taunts and laughter because they must have thought I was training to run away from them. At the same time, it served me as therapy. I didn't always like running. Shortly after I started boxing in Madrid, I had to add running routines to gain endurance and to be able to stand up through a full fight. It was exhausting, but necessary. In the end, running half an hour every day turned out to be a forged balm to indoctrinate my body and mind.

Soon it would be my time and the situation would change completely. Soon that laughter would turn into screams. Screams of pain. Or at least that's what I wanted to believe. It was that or death.

There were no other alternatives.

## Singapore 4

At last Monday. First day of work. I got up at six-thirty in the morning, had coffee with cereal and a glass of juice. A full breakfast. In the meantime, my roommates told me that what they used to do, and also a lot of people, was to have breakfast at work in the company cafeteria, where there were free drinks, fruit and pastries, or in the places in the building if they wanted something different. This way they could chat with their co-workers before they started the day. Sometimes there were people having for breakfast, especially the foreigners from Asia, things like noodles, soups, stir fried vegetables... It was very strange to see them eat that for breakfast. I got dressed and waited ten minutes for the others to be ready.

We were a bit disorganized and decided to take a taxi to go to work. For just ten Singapore dollars, paid by Josele, we were at the door of our building in fifteen minutes, an entrance like that of hotels where the cars stop to unload the bags.

The area was a complex of four white octagonal skyscrapers called Raffles City Tower. Apparently, it had a giant shopping mall, offices, convention centre, restaurants and two hotels occupying two of the towers. Each skyscraper had to be forty or forty-five storeys. It was impressive. To the right of the entrance where we were there was a bar called Salt Tapas & Bar, a premonitory name for the Spaniards, like those back home. Fate, in which I did not believe, seemed to tell me that I was where I needed to be.

Our offices were on the 36th floor of the Raffles City Tower office tower. The views must be spectacular. At the entrance, since it was my first day, they had to identify me and give me an access card. Once I had it, we took the elevator to the office. Our floor was diaphanous, with almost no walls except for the meeting rooms. On the way to my supervisor, I ran into Teresa and Diego. We greeted each other quickly and said we will meet later in the cafeteria on our floor. Afterwards, Damaso went to his desk and Josele took me to Amit Dabrai, the Indian who was my new boss.

Amit was a very dry and smug person. He told me broadly what the project was about as if he was doing me a favour and showed me to my desk, where my laptop was already waiting for me. I signed all the laptop and cell phone papers and settled in my spot. Amit shared with me a cloud folder with all the documentation and told me that Jerome, who was my partner in the project, would tell me what was most important to read first. He insisted that I had to catch up very quickly and that he wanted me to start working at full speed that very week. What a serious and stiff boss I had! It reminded me a lot of one that I had in a project in Spain.

Jerome, who was French, turned out to be completely different than Amit. He was like a goat, crazy as a goat. To define him as an extrovert was falling short. In addition, he had a contagious enthusiasm and vitality and seemed to always be in a good mood. He spoke English with a very strong French accent that I had a hard time getting used to listening without laughing. He told me what main documents to read and gave me a presentation of the project for almost an hour, emphasizing its really important aspects: what it was, what was expected of us, where we were at and what were the next steps we had to take. All that after going to the cafeteria and chatting with Tere and Diego.

Later Josele accompanied me to a branch of POSB bank to open an account. He had his with the same bank, which was a state one that worked very well. As I was told, being a tax haven, opening accounts was a very simple process. I was asked for the FIN number, which was the equivalent of the Spanish ID card. The company had provided me with the work permit, but apparently you could open an account without it, and you could show it once you had it. It was all formalities. I was given a debit card right away and my online and phone credentials.

Nearby was an exclusive office for private banking.

“Here, with a nice wad of cash, you don’t even need to identify yourself,” said Josele with a mischievous expression. “Although they won’t say it openly, of course. These people are all facilities to receive money.”

“Well, I hope I can become their client,” I said.

Once all was set, we went back to the office.

## Singapore 5

Josele came up smiling to my desk.

“Guess what, guess what.”

“I don't know, do you have any brown ones to give me that you need to finish before the end of the week? I'm up to my ears trying to catch up on this, but I'll help you in any way I can.”

“No! Even better.”

“Tell me.”

“This Saturday we have a party at Avalon, one of the trendy nightclubs. The one I told you that it's on the other side of the river, by the Museum of Arts and Sciences.”

“Well, not too surprising. I'm under the impression that every Saturday we have a party.”

“This one it's special. It's a tribute to the Spanish expats. It's going to be full of Spaniards and expats from other countries. This is your chance to meet people of all kinds and all places!”

“I already know you guys. I don't think I need to meet any more people for the next five years...”  
I smiled glad to be with them.

“Yes, but we need to get rid of you from time to time. You're like one of those hindrances that sharks carry. It's okay to take them out, but sometimes you need freedom. If you know what I mean.”

“If you want me to leave you alone, you just have to tell me, you bastards.”

“Just kidding! You know that. But it won't hurt to meet new people and get waisted.”

“Yes, man, I know. I'm tired of whining around the corners like a prick. Let's see if we find a trio of beautiful Australians in need of affection. Because of Spanish women I had enough for a long time. What I need is some pelvic exercise. You know what I mean,” I said, making an unobtrusive move back and forth.

“That's my boy! Let's tell Damaso and get organized.”

I got up and we went to tell Damaso about the plans. This Saturday we'd be tearing down Singapore.

The rest of the week seemed so long. Everyone around us was talking about that big party for Spaniards. Everyone made plans and laughed at the things they would do. The three of us and Diego went for a run a couple of afternoons in an intent to release tension and focus for a while on something else, but all the efforts were fruitless; and on top of it we pushed ourselves and our legs hurt the entire week. Even the corporate league basketball game was just an excuse to talk about the same thing.

Saturday finally arrived. The party was late at night. So, in the morning I got up early and went to the gym for a while. The legs were done, but there was plenty to work on the arms. Then I went with Diego to a morning movie at the Golden Village Cinema, just a fifteen minutes' walk from the office. The movie theatre had large seats, plenty of room to stretch your legs and occasionally they had classic film. They were playing some of the best sci-fi movies ever, and Diego and I had bought a pass for all of them. Re-watching *Alien*, *Star Wars*, *Dune* or *Blade Runner* on a giant screen was priceless. We were both fans of the genre.

After the movie, that day it was the *Matrix*, we ate at a fast-food restaurant called *Mos Burger*, which, as the name suggests, specialized in burgers. It was Japanese burger week and they had some with very strange ingredients like soy sauce or miso. Anyway, I wasn't too impressed. What happened to a good burger with barbecue sauce, cheese, tomato, and onion and not these rare experiments? Then we each went to our house to take a shower and get ready for the party, which was starting soon, at seven o'clock.

When I got home, Damaso and Josele were getting ready enthusiastically. Josele was glued to the bathroom mirror with his little toupee that gave him the air of the "King" and Damaso was analysing the clothes in his closet so focused that he seemed to be playing the most difficult chess game in history. I showered and choose a fancy attire, but not too fancy. I didn't want to look out

of place, but I also didn't want to look like a dandy. When we were all ready, we went down to the street, where the taxi we had ordered was waiting for us and went to the party. In fifteen minutes, we were at the door.

The entrance was a glass structure with the words Avalon in fluorescent letters. It was right next to Marina Bay, so the view across the bay, including the skyscraper where we worked, was impressive, with all those tall buildings lit up. Not to say that it was better than the night views of Manhattan from Brooklyn, in New York. We arrived early, so there weren't yet too many people and we were able to choose a good place to sit. At parties, the same thing happens as in internet marketing. The three key factors were positioning, positioning, and positioning. Inside it had the air of an industrial ship and with all the lights and music reminded me of the cyberpunk movement, very similar to the setting of the film Blade Runner that Diego and I would go to see the following week. At the back, on a platform with lots of lights on the wall behind it which were randomly turning on and off, was the DJ plying electronic music or whatever they call it. His name didn't tell me anything, but music was not my forte. Better said, I had no clue. Anyway, he seemed well known here because when he was announced people went crazy.

We were supposed to meet with our co-workers which gradually arrived until we were over twenty. However, Spaniards only five: Teresa, Damaso, Josele, Diego and me. I found it strange to speak English to my Spanish friends, but I did so out of courtesy to the rest of the people who did not speak Spanish. We drank and danced, laughed, and told funny stories of things that happened to them in the place. At the party, more than 80% of us were expats or at least looked like Westerners. Many of the groups were speaking Spanish.

More Spaniards, that I did not know, joined our group. Two men and one woman. Damaso, of course, knew all of them and introduced them.

“David, this is Nacho. I don't know if you've ever heard of a photographer named Ignacio Insua.”

“No, but I'm not in the world of photography either.”

“Well, anyway. It's him. Josele met him at a photo exhibition a few weeks ago. In Spain he exhibited in several museums and art galleries. A well-known local actress noticed him, and he came here to make her a portfolio. Since then, he became the photographer of Singapore's celebrities and major events. Besides being a good golfer, of course.”

“Delighted Nacho. I understand why you know Damaso. I hope to succeed here and that you can be my lead photographer, because in golf I don't think we will meet. I'm more of an action sports person.”

“Of course. That would be great. A Spanish customer who can afford my not so moderate rates. Nice to meet you, David.”

“You can always drive a boat for a photo shoot and get some extra money.”

“Are you for real?” “Yes. Sometimes we make portfolios and ads on boats. I need a driver once in a while.”

“Sure,” I said, smiling at the use of the word driver instead of pilot. “I have the Yacht Captain title. I love boating. You can count on me. I love everything that has to do with boats.”

“I won't forget.”

Damaso continued with the presentations.

“These two beautiful brunettes are a couple, and their names are Elena and Rachel. They own a gluten-free pastry shop.”

“Hello, two kisses, right? What brings you to Singapore?”

“We wanted to experience another country and we saw that here they had the same celiac as everywhere, but it turned out that they didn't have many shops for them,” Elena explained as I was giving Rachel two kisses.

“I had a celiac friend in Madrid. Some of the sweets he ate were just as good as the normal ones. I couldn't tell them apart. I'll stop by your store one day to try them out.”

“Whenever you want,” Rachel said. “Here's a card for you!”

“Thanks. I see that you came prepared. I like that. And what's your name?” I said turning to the fourth. “I'm still David ...” I said smiling.

“My name is Pamos, Juan Pamos,” he said, imitating the James Bond style.

“Be careful with him, David,” Damaso warned me. “He's an opportunist. He is supposedly a stunt man, but I don't know if he started his profession. His parents are wealthy entrepreneurs in the export field and he only parties and messes with as many girls as he can, whether they have a boyfriend or not. He only takes a break from the parties to golf with me and Nacho.”

“Golf? It's clear how you've made your friends. Well, I'm alone here, without a partner, and I'm not a girl, so I have nothing to worry about. Maybe you can introduce me to some beautiful friend of yours...” I laughed hard.

I chatted for some time with everyone, co-workers, and new acquaintances. Then, on a walk I took to the bathroom, a man with an English accent approached me and offered me some substance I was not familiar with but that was definitely some kind of drug. I rejected it sharply and went on my way. I had never taken drugs, even in my most rebellious days, nor did I want to start now. I did not like for anything to control my life and that was the typical path to becoming a slave to the daily dose. This was something I was firm about. I didn't smoke either, although I did start, but I had to quit because it was incompatible with the exercise I did, and even though I drank, I never let alcohol make me lose control. My friends sometimes teased me about it, especially Damaso, who was a champion in drinking, but I liked to feel in control. I was a little obsessive with it.

When I came back, I offered to get drinks for Tere and my co-worker, the crazy Jerome. While at the bar waiting for a waiter to see me, a beautiful Thai-looking girl came next to me. She had dark, long, curly hair in two endless ponytails that hung on both sides of her head over her chest. She was wearing a green, cloth cap and a strap top of the same colour. Her round face and a beautiful smile were highlighted by a very soft red lipstick. Her eyes were dark brown, a little oriental, but not too much. She was pretty tall, probably close to a meter seventy and was thin. I couldn't say that I fell in love at first sight, that would be silly, but my Iberian male hormones gave a triple mortal leap; especially when she turned to me and spoke to me in a perfect English with a sweet and musical voice that I could only hear because it coincided with a drop in the music volume.

“I'm sorry, did I cut in front of you?”

“No, no. It's ok... Don't worry about it. I'm still waiting to be served. You can order first so that you don't keep your companion waiting.”

“My companion? I am alone. I came with a friend, but she had to leave... wait! It was a strategy to find out just that, right?”

“Well, you got me,” I recognized smiling. “Although I find it hard to believe that such a beautiful woman doesn't have company.”

My comment seemed to amuse her, and she began to laugh with a singing laugh that instantly enchanted me. We remained quiet and looked at each other for a few minutes.

“I'm sorry, I didn't introduce myself,” I said, reacting. “My name is David; I am one of the Spanish expats honoured at this party.”

“Spanish? From your English I thought you were American...” she said with a grimace.

“That's because my mother is American. From Boerne, a small town of ten thousand inhabitants in Texas, near San Antonio. A hiking paradise full of beautiful routes, though not as much as you, that I have never seen in my life. And what's your name? I think you forgot to tell me, or is it a secret?”

“No, no, it's not any secret. My name is Sumalee, Sumalee Sintawichai. In Thai, my name means beautiful flower.”

“Beautiful flower? I'll keep to myself the compliment, but it's obviously a perfect name for you. They say Thailand is the country of smiles. If everyone has it as pretty as yours, it must be paradise.”

“It's hard not to smile at a guy like you,” she replied.

I swear that her smile was worth a war. She was gorgeous. It was clear that this woman had caught my attention.

“Did you say Simalee Sintawachi?” I screamed trying to overcome the sound around us. “I will try to remember it.”

“No, Sumalee Sintawichai,” she repeated in my ear so that she wouldn't have to scream, which gave me goosebumps. “Although I think Sumalee will do. I don't want your head to explode on the first day.”

First day? Did she want us to see each other again? Because I did, that was clear. As many times as I could. Such a pretty girl I would always want her by my side. I didn't say anything about her comment and offered her to join us. She accepted delighted on the condition that would not leave her alone at any time. There was no harm for me to agree to her terms, and once I ordered Jerome and Tere's drinks, and I offered her one, we headed toward the group. I introduced her to all my companions, and I was amazed at how comfortable she was among so many strangers. When it was Damaso's turn, who was already under the spell of the alcohol, he started throwing compliments screaming and I had to stop him.

“Down boy! And you want to keep your hands off if you wanna keep them. Save your charms for another woman. Sumalee's with me tonight. We have a deal. Right?”

“Sure thing. Just for you,” she said, as she winked at me and grabbed my arm. “We agreed not to separate for a moment today.”

Damaso, Jerome, Josele and Diego looked at me amazed. They didn't know whether to think I'd been hit by the lottery or if there was a trap behind so much luck. I did not care; I just wanted the night to last forever. I was feeling euphoric. I had just arrived, and I had already linked. It was clear that my seven years with Cristina had not made me lose my legendary skill with women.

We spent the entire party talking non-stop. We felt very comfortable with each other, as if we knew each other all our lives. She told me that she worked for a travel agency organizing mostly trips to Thailand, her country, or from there to Singapore. She had to leave because her mother was sick, and she needed to make more money to pay for the treatment. In Thailand she had a good job, but salaries were very low, so she came to Singapore as advised by a friend. With what she saved, she could send enough money home for her mother's medication. She was from an area called Chiang Rai, in the north of the country, almost bordering Myanmar and Laos. Her family was poor, and she had to work hard to get a scholarship and study Marketing at Thammasat University. When she finished school, she got a good job with a big company, but the salaries were very low compared with what she needed and that pushed her to Singapore, where, fortunately for me, she was now.

We had many things in common. We both loved sport, travelling, reading, trying new things, adventure, everything related to space... As if we were soul mates. I couldn't believe my luck. The night seemed to be a success.

I don't know at which point in the night we got there, but next thing I knew we were talking with her right hand over mine and caressed by my left hand. Her skin was very soft and I noticed a tightness in my chest that made it difficult to breathe. Also, because the music was very loud and there were a lot of people screaming, we had to talk to each other's ear, which made the situation even more exciting when she said something to me and her breath was stroking my face. We seemed like two lovers confiding into one another. It was hard not to turn and kiss and caress her, unleashing the burning that I noticed all over my body, but I didn't know the customs of the place and didn't want to ruin the night.

We talked about my family, about what had brought me to Singapore... She asked me endless things of all kinds. How long I was going to be in Singapore, whether I liked to travel... She was

very interested when I told her the whole story with my ex-girlfriend. She said she thought it was unbelievable that a girl could leave me for another. I was liking Sumalee more and more. She had definitely climbed positions to the top of my favourite people in Singapore.

We had such complicity and confidence that we seemed to have been together all our life. As she spoke to me, I could smell her hair, which had a very defined fragrance that she later told me was jasmine, and I noticed a strange feeling that I hadn't felt in a long time.

It felt as if I was falling in love, but I'm sure it wasn't that, but rather the sexual attraction of the first date. It seemed madness. I had just met her. She had a tragic story, but, although she seemed made to be my soul mate, it could have not been so easy.

Did it make any sense?

## Singapore 6

The next morning, I had plans with Sumalee to spend the day together. She offered to show me the city and be my private guide, which I thought was a fantastic proposition. She was a travel professional and much prettier than Josele or Damaso. Besides, they had plans to play golf with the photographer and for me it was a sport that didn't attract me much.

Despite the fact that the party went on until late, we planned to meet early at the door of Leong Nam Temple in the Geyland neighbourhood because she told me she wanted to show me something that looked better early. We exchanged numbers in case anything came up and the first thing I did as soon as I woke up was to look at my phone fearing that she might have cancelled the date; but there were no messages from her. When I arrived, she was already there, waiting. She was wearing a pair of blue shorts that didn't even reach halfway on her thigh, a turquoise strap top and a very thin sweater, also a shade of blue. She was beautiful, she was beautiful, and she knew how to highlight it. When she saw me at a distance her face drew an incredible smile, and she came running toward me. She hugged me and kisses me on the cheek.

“Hi, David! I couldn't wait to see you.”

She pronounced the 'a' of my name with a delicious mix of 'a' and 'i'. Something like Daivid, which sounded like heavenly music.

“Hello. Me too. I couldn't think of anything else since we said goodbye last night.”

“You are so silly! It's not that big of a deal.”

“It is, believe me, it is. What are you going to show me today? You have me on fire!”

“This is Geylang. It is among the least developed in Singapore and maintains the traditional cuisine of the area. Here is the traditional Asian market, Geylang Serai. It's full of fruit shops and other fresh produce, almost all run by Malays. Sunday mornings is filled with people and noise, but if you come early you have the entire market to yourself,” she said enthusiastically. “I love coming at dawn and wandering through the stalls with the bustle of the merchants getting ready and the incredible outpour of mixture of fresh fruit before it gets filled with people and fades with other odours. It's like walking through orchards. It reminds me of some parts of my country.”

You could see in her expression that she really enjoyed those walks.”

“Sounds really good. Or maybe you're just a great seller. Let's go! Show me around.”

We began to wander among the greengrocers on the main streets and the *lorong*, which is what they call in Malay the side alleys. The houses were the same style like in the Indian neighbourhood, low, two stories and each one a different colour. We stopped in different spots and Sumalee explained to me the different typical fruits of the markets in this area: the *longan*, white on the inside, looked like a potato, the mango, which I already knew, the *mangosteen*, sweeter than the mango, and one that caught my attention, the durian, with spikes of greenish colour and the size of a small melon. When cut open it had a yellow pulp.

“The weird thing about this fruit,” Sumalee said, “is that it has a very strong odour and because of it is prohibited eating it in public transport and hotels to avoid bothering those around. It really smells.” She said putting a piece under my nose which forced me to move away quickly to get away from the smell.

“Is my nose dirty?”

“One second,” Sumalee said and pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped me carefully. I couldn't stop staring at her while she was doing it. “Done.” Her gesture gave me a shiver.

There were also many stalls with dry fish, frogs, eels. All a Western could expect from an oriental market.

She was right. It was a relaxing walk with a mixture of sweet aromas that took you back to the countryside. As time passed it was filling up with people, very few of them westerners, and the noises and smells changed, losing all the original charm.

“So, what else can be done around here?”

“Depends what you like. To the south is what they call the red-light district of Singapore, like the one in Amsterdam.”

“No. Thanks. With a woman like you by my side I don’t think I could find anything even remotely similar in the red-light district or even in Singapore. Certainly not in entire Asia.”

For a moment she stood staring at me without saying anything. I felt as if she was peering into my mind through my eyes. I feared for a moment that I had offended her but said nothing.

“There are also many temples and Villa Cultural Malaya. A museum where you can see crafts, hear traditional music and taste local cuisine.”

“Since we are in a Malay area we could go to listen to some traditional music and eat something typical, right? I’m a book tourist. In fact, I read one on the way here.”

“Deal! Let’s go there.”

With her right hand she took my left and yanked me to follow her. For a moment I squeezed her hand tightly to make sure she was there.

Shortly, we arrived at the museum. It was a complex of several low buildings with corrugated roofs, very oriental style. Inside there were typical objects and Malay waggons drawn by oxen as samples of crafts and all kinds of information about the culture and the cuisine. There was also a house you could visit, set in the traditional style. You could tell she liked to travel and experience new things besides working in the travel industry, because she looked at everything with the curiosity typical of a child, marvelling and getting excited about everything. I liked the visit, but really, I did not enjoy it as much as she did because I was focused only on the touch of my hand with hers and the fascinated expression on her face. She had an angelic face. I wanted to kiss her so badly!

When we finished, she said she was going to take me to eat something typical Singaporean and I let her without saying a word. Instead of going to the front door she took me in the back alley and knocked at the kitchen door. She had me intrigued. A big belly man with a dirty apron opened the door screaming angry, but when he saw Sumalee he stopped and went back inside, closing the door with a strong blow. A minute later the door reopened, and a very small girl appeared, who also looked Thai, who jumped into the arms of Sumalee and hugged her. They started talking Thai and then Sumalee motioned me to come over.

“This is David. David, this is my friend [Kai-Mook](#) of which I told you last night. She is also Thai and works in this restaurant. She will prepare something for us.”

“Nice to meet you. No need to worry, Sumalee didn’t say anything bad about you”, I said smiling.

“Nice to meet you too. Come in to choose for Swikee.” Her English was not too good.

“Choose for what?” I looked at Sumalee.

“Go in and you will see.”

I followed her into the kitchen and to a place where there was a giant bowl with a lid. Kai-Mook lifted the lid and inside were a dozen frogs leaping, trying to escape the plastic prison.

“Frogs?” I exclaimed looking at Sumalee.

“Yes, they are considered a typical delicacy here. They prepare a delicious frog soup, the Swikee.”

“If you say so... The truth is I have never had it.”

I was a little hesitant, but I did not want to seem too picky, so I chose the frogs I wanted, the ones that seemed nicer if there is such a thing, and I sat at the table assigned to us, waiting for the food and talking to Sumalee about what we would do next. Shortly, Kai-Mook appeared with a tureen in hand. When she opened it to served us the frog soup, I have to admit that it looked appetizing.

With strips of red peppers, something that looked like cilantro, chili and other things that I was not able to identify.

I started to eat it with a little apprehension, but once I took the first spoon all my fears vanished. It was so tasty. I devoured the rest of the frog greedily. I raised my head and saw that Sumalee was watching me amused.

“It’s delicious, right?”

“I must admit, this is a delicacy. I have to bring my friends here. They will be amazed!”

“I knew you’d like it. The chef of this restaurant prepares the best frog soup in the city. If you come with them ask for Kai-Mook and you will receive special treatment. Now she knows you and she will take care of you as if you were me.”

I looked into her eyes as she took a breath. I didn’t know what madness I was about to do, but I was going to tell her what I was beginning to feel when Kai-Mook interrupted approaching us to ask how the soup was. I said the same thing as Sumalee, that it was delicious, and she happily went back to the kitchen. The rest of the food was also dishes I was not familiar with, very tasty, but none like the soup. We laughed telling funny stories from our travels.

When we finished, Kai-Mook gave her a bag. She would not say what it was. She also did not let me pay insisting that it was her day as a guide, and she would take care of the expenses. I grabbed her face and looking at her intently, gave her a soft kiss on the forehead while my fingers caressed her temples. I noticed she trembled, but I did not know whether it was emotion or rejection. The important thing was that she did not pull away. A shiver of excitement ran through my body as I touched her skin. At that moment, I felt an almost uncontrollable desire to throw myself over her and kiss her, but I managed to restrain myself. I not only loved being with her and felt very comfortable, but it excited me greatly.

We went out into the street. She went straight to a small park on the other side and gave the bag to a woman that looked homeless. The woman took something from inside and I saw it was food. They chatted for a moment as if they had known each other their entire life and then continued on our way.

“She is a struggling woman. I met her when I came to see Kai-Mook. I always give her some hot food to eat well for the day.”

“Not only beautiful, but also a good person. You do not stop surprising me.”

I’ve put my arm around her shoulders, and we took the bus to the East Coast Park in the southeast side of the island. We decided to change completely the air and I wanted to see some water and there were beaches, palm trees and sea. A perfect place to get to know Sumalee a little more.

When we arrived, we went toward the park. Sumalee was deep in thought for a moment and then she asked me.

“Can you rollerblade?”

“No, I never tried it. When I was a child, I tried a bit the skateboard, but my balance wasn’t great, so I gave up.”

“Well, then we’ll leave that for another day. What about riding a bicycle?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, let’s rent a bicycle to see the park. Do you want?”

“Perfect!”

Said and done. We headed to the rentals and although they had tandem bicycles and carts with a roof, we decided on two single red ones for the remainder of the day. It seemed to be a popular activity because the park was full of people cycling and rollerblading. There was a two-way lane clearly marked. Sumalee was telling me everything I needed to know while we pedalled quietly.

“The park is divided into different areas. With different activities. In Singapore they are very organized, as you will find out.”

“Yes, I’m starting to see that.”

“Here on the right is the barbecue area. Many families and groups of friends come, especially on weekends. There are also many restaurants and cafes if you prefer not to cook. To use them you have to reserve them. It can be done online.”

“As you said,” I said smiling, “very organized. And this?”

“That's the water sports area. You can rent kayaks, do water skiing, scuba diving and much more. Do you like these kinds of activities?”

“I love them. What about you?”

“I haven't tried them too much, but we could try together.”

“Of course! I have it in my plans since I knew I was coming.”

“Now we are arriving to the area where you can play in the sand. It is very typical that people build castles. Look!”

We stopped for a moment to watch how a group of young people finished building a huge sand temple. It must have been almost two meters high and four meters wide. Neither one of us recognized the building, but Sumalee told me that the style was very similar to the temples of Angkor in Cambodia. There were quite a few people taking pictures. Sumalee told me that another typical activity in the park was photography. Another thing that abounded were people running. It was like the Retiro Park in Madrid, but almost twice as large, with sea and more variety of activities. Yes, very organized with everything in its designated area. Even too artificial. We got back on the bikes and keep moving. We passed a building with the Burger King logo. That gave me a sarcastic smile. As far as one believes to be from their environment, the supposed "civilization" had arrived earlier.

“Sumalee, and that, what is it? A campsite?”

“Yes, there are a few designated areas for camping. You can also book them online ...” she said laughing.

“I do not doubt it,” I said, thinking of how much I liked the sound of her laughter.

We pedalled for a couple of hours, covering fifteen kilometres of coastline, and stopping occasionally to see something, rest or at a kiosk for drinks. One of them sold oysters for a dollar, so we ate a couple each. To drink, advised by Sumalee, I ordered a couple of Tiger beers, the typical beer there, which had a tiger as a logo and was a pale golden colour. It was smooth and I liked it. We cheered for many days like this.

We saw people fishing on the docks, families, couples in love, friends barbecuing, long sandy beaches with a width ranging from ten meters to just one with palms and other trees, but the beaches were not the greatest, there were plenty of plastic bottles scattered and the sea was always full of large freighters. There was also a skating rink with obstacles, areas with equipment for gymnastics, volleyball courts, covered benches to rest, narrow roads of large flat stones where only one could walk ... and many maps to guide you along the way. The possibilities were amazing, although the maintenance and cleanliness not as expected. Sumalee told me that it used to be better and that in recent times it had declined slightly. I found funny a sign prohibiting laser pointers pointing to airplanes. The planes passed very low because Changi Airport was not far from there. Another complaint about the place was the overcrowding in almost all areas, although I had to keep in mind that it was Sunday, the day with the highest number of people. In theory, the rest of the days would be much quieter.

When we got tired of going around, we stopped at a beach area where there was nobody. It was getting late and people were going home. Tomorrow was Monday and back to work. We took our shoes off and approached the shore of the sea. We stopped right where the water of the waves caressed occasionally our feet.

“Water in this area tends to be dirty, it is not advisable to bathe, although we have seen some do it”, Sumalee said. “In any case, they do not allow swimming too far from the shore.”

“Dirty? Is there something dirty in Singapore? That is news to me. Although these beaches also need cleaning.”

“Yes. It is because of all the ships. Even so, I sometimes come here, I sit, and I lose myself watching the blue of the sea. I know that on the other side is my land, my home, my mother.”

I looked at Sumalee. For a moment she had become melancholic and seemed about to cry. I put my arm around her shoulder and pulled her gently toward me.

“It must be hard to be away from her for so long and, above all, knowing that she needs you. You have to think that this is all for her and that once you pay your debt, you will be able to be together forever and you've been the one who saved her.”

“Yes, when I will have paid my debt,” said with a sigh. “Even if it means making decisions that I do not always like.”

“What decisions?”

“Eh! Nothing, nothing. My things.”

We remained cuddled for some time without saying anything. Close by we could see a catamaran and a few yellow kayaks rented from the park. Farther dozens of freighters, all large or very large. I guess their waste and loss of gasoline in the water was enough to make the water dirty regardless of how much cleaning they did.

Sunlight began to decrease. It was beginning to get dark. According to the park schedule it was only illuminated from 7:00 to 19:00. Soon it will be dark, and we had to go back because we didn't want to ride in the dark.

Sumalee came closer and I felt her head touching my body. I gathered all my courage and looked for her arm with mine. It did not take me long to find it and I squeezed it tightly. She reciprocated. The dirty beach, dirty water or number of ships did not matter. The orange sky, the silence around us broken only by a singing bird and her hand clutching mine, was heaven.

I turned to her nervous and with my other hand I gently grabbed her chin and lifted her head slightly so that we looked into each other's eyes a few centimetres apart. She looked at me serious, intensely, expectantly. I ducked my head and put my lips on hers. She parted them a little and I took her lower lip between mine. I held it one second savouring it and then pulled away slowly, slowly letting it go. For a moment I thought she was going to throw herself to give me another kiss, but suddenly her face changed.

“We have ... we have to go, she said shakily.”

“I suppose, although it's not because I feel like moving from here. I want this moment to last forever.”

She didn't answer. She turned and pulled my hand to follow her. We got on the bicycles and rode back to the entrance as fast as we could. Even so, the last few minutes were in almost dark.

We returned the bikes and walked to the bus stop holding hands and without saying a word. We had to take different buses. The first to arrive was hers. When we arrived at the stop, she gave me a soft kiss on the cheek, she caressed my face with a hint of sadness in her eyes and got on. Halfway on the stairs she turned and said:

“Talk soon. Take care of yourself!”

“You too, Sumalee. Is everything alright?”

She turned without answering and looked for a seat. I watched her bus go with a strange feeling. A mixture of euphoria from the kiss and confusion given her attitude afterwards. I was not sure what to expect. She did not reject the kiss, even reciprocated, but something stopped her after, she did not look at me and had seemed lost in thoughts, I would say almost afflicted. Still, she said we will talk. How was I supposed to interpret this? Maybe she did not want to kiss me because she didn't feel the same as me, but was not able to say no, maybe the kiss reminded her of a past lover ... Maybe in her culture was wrong to kiss so soon. I had no idea.

I had to find out, I needed to know. Now I could only think about how she would be the next time we will see each other: the cheerful and always smiling Sumalee or the dejected one that just said goodbye to me.

I couldn't wait to know the answer.

## Thailand 14

I was sitting on the patio watching the Muay Thai training. I was thinking about how the worst of the prison was boredom. So many hours alone with nothing to do, no one to talk to, not even to share a thought, when I was approached by a large, bald and disturbed face man who sometimes I saw hanging around. He had a long scar, badly healed, all the way from the left eye to the middle of the head. He did not relate much to the rest of the prisoners and no one seemed to want to get too close to him. He looked like being quite sick in the head. He stood in front of me swinging from side to side and stared at me without blinking. I didn't know what to make of it. Was he going to hit me, or he just enjoyed staring at me? In any case it was scary. After a few seconds of tension, he turned to me with a strong Australian accent.

“What did you do to them?”

“What?”

“Yes, what did you do to those damn yellows that they treat you this way?” he asked again nodding to the group of stalkers chatting to the other end of the yard.

“Nothing, as far as I know ... I have not done anything to anyone in jail. As they are not brothers of the bitch that got me in here ...”

“Yeah, it is strange then that they pursue you the way they do, right?”

“Exactly my thoughts. What can I do?”

“Nothing, I guess.”

“It's not that I mind you chatting with me, in fact I really appreciate it, but aren't you afraid that they will come after you for talking to me? Nobody wants to come anywhere close to me because of that.”

“After me? I don't think so. Since I came here, I played the part of a dangerous madman capable of anything, and since then, nobody messes with me. And this for many years.”

“How did you manage that?” I asked, but really it should have not been difficult to impersonate a dangerous madman. I believed it. I could have used a strategy like that.

“The first day when a fucking yellow skin stood before me thuggish, I screamed like a madman and I pounced on him, hitting, biting, pulling hair ... As if a demon possessed me. I almost killed him. In fact, in that fight I got this scar when his friends came to defend him. But he was worse, I assure you.” He said it with sadistic eyes and half a smile. “I spent a while in isolation, but when I came out between my not very friendly face and the fame generated by the fight no one has dared to cross my path. Occasionally I do something stupid or scare someone so that they don't forget that I am capable of anything and that's it. If they see me with you, they will think it's an eccentricity over the *farang* crackpot. By the way, my name is James,” he said, extending his hand.

“David, delighted,” I replied giving my hand in turn. “What's that *farang*?”

“It's what the stupid locals call us westerners. I don't know if it means foreigner, white or demon; but I don't care either. And another thing, don't get me wrong, just because I'm talking to you it doesn't mean that I'll help you when they attack you. It's one thing that I like to mess with them a little and quite another to risk it with the chinos for you, I don't give a shit about you.”

It was clear that my new friend did not hold great esteem for the Thai, not to say he seemed pretty racist, but it's not that I had much choice. He was the first person who dared to relate to me since I got in. Under normal circumstances I would have turned around after telling him what I thought of racists, but I wasn't in a normal situation. In fact, I was right in the opposite of normal. And I didn't completely disagree that there were some Thai people who deserved to die. At least some.

We talked banalities for a while. He made fun a bit of the prisoners who were training, screaming at them as if it was the final of the world championship fight and he had staked all his money on the result of the combat. Some stopped to see who was screaming like that at them, but

when they saw it was him, they minded their own business. I didn't want any attention, so I put my head between my legs so that they don't recognize me.

He also spent a few minutes cursing about the number of blacks in the prison. He told me that almost all of them were Nigerians and all were in for drug related issues. There was a lot of drug trafficking with Nigeria. Although, their leader was not Nigerian, that's for sure, though no one seemed to know his origin. He was a man also black, big and strong, with a curious crescent shaped scar on the face and which all seemed to fear. Even James. Apparently, he was an African mercenary, a child of war forced to fight and kill from a very young age and who didn't mess around. He seemed very quiet, but when needed, he was very violent and did not seem to be afraid of anything or anyone. There were many rumours about him, though no one knew whether they were true or false: that he had been forced to kill his brother when he was forced to enrol in an armed group at eleven. Two years later he killed the boss that ordered him to kill his brother and he was named leader. That he was a hired murderer, that he had been slaving in the Congo war, that he ate the heart of his victims, that he had raped hundreds of men and women, including children, that he enjoyed killing with his bare arms, that once he burned alive a whole town just because they would not tell him where a person who he was searching for was, that he had trafficked with all kinds of illegal products ... So many atrocities ... and looking at him none seemed impossible. He was really scary. Very. Fortunately, he was completely ignoring me.

When James got tired of cursing everyone, he got up and left as he had come, without saying anything. I saw him walk away, feeling partly relieved to have been able to talk to someone after so long.

At this point this was satisfying enough.

## Singapore 7

When I got home Josele and Damaso jumped on me with questions about the date. We sat in the living room and told them what we did, where we went and, above all, what happened in the end on the beach. The two stopped to think about it for a moment. Josele was the first to speak.

“Sure, it's a paranoia of yours. She only wanted to take things slower.”

“I don't know, Josele. You were not there. It was something else. It seemed that we would continue kissing and then something crossed her mind and she pulled back. I'm sure of what she wanted, but I cannot imagine what made her stop. Maybe she has some kind of disease that can infect, I don't know what to think.”

“Don't be silly. Sure is something much simpler than that. Things tend to be simpler than we think, it is us who complicate them. Sure, it's what you say about the customs in her country or something like that.”

“I'm with Josele,” said Damaso. “Ask her out this week and you will see how things turn around.”

“I hope you are right. I only know her for two days, but this girl has something special that makes me crazy.”

“Are you falling in love...” Josele said.

“No way! How can I be in love if I just met her yesterday? All I wanted was a girl to have fun with.”

“Well now you tell me,” Josele said. “The first night nothing, yesterday a little kiss and today you are eating coals ... My friend you have a problem.”

“Yes, you do,” whispered Damaso mockingly. “I also noticed it when you introduced her to us yesterday ... He has a point.” He said bursting in laughter.

“What a jerk you are!”

We all laughed hard. I could use a little nonsense. It was true that she was a lovely girl with an amazing body. It was clear that it was the first thing I noticed when I saw her at the bar. But as we talked during the party, Saturday, I began to realize that almost certainly she was even prettier on the inside than on the outside and that she could enrich my life. I heard myself saying those sappy things and I laughed thinking I could have not fallen in love in just two days. Maybe it was due to the low mood I brought with me from Spain with the recent break up. Damaso then surprised me with the story of a girl from Singapore which Josele had been with.

“And, are you going to see her again?” I asked.

“With her? Not only I don't have her phone number, but I don't even know her name. With these names so different ...” Josele could not stop laughing.

We laughed hard again. Josele was an incurable Casanova. Damaso did not dismiss a good chance if it crossed his path, but what attracted him more was the party, any sports on which he could bet, tanning and golf.

I went to bed early because next day was Monday and I had to work, but I could not sleep the entire night. I tossed and turned in bed looking at the phone to see if she wrote a message and wondering if I should write one. I decided not to do it because I did not want to overwhelm her, but I did not lack the desire.

When the time came to wake up, I had barely slept a couple of hours in short periods of time. Every time I woke up, I looked at the phone for a message from her. I tried to convince myself that it was not so bad, but it didn't work. We went to the office and had breakfast in the cafeteria with Diego, Tere, Jérôme and a very shy girl named Aileen Beijing Meng. Knowing that Diego and Tere were together I could not look at them as before. Now everything seemed to me gestures of complicity between them. I could not help smiling when I saw them together. Envy, perhaps.

Jerome and Diego told a story that seemed very funny from the way they all laughed, about the look on the face when an American tourist was fined a thousand dollars for chewing gum. Gum was prohibited in Singapore. He tried to argue with the police about the meaning of discrimination bringing up individual liberties and lots more typical movie ideas than the reality of Singapore. I struggled to smile when I noticed that the others were doing it, but I was too distracted. I thought it was a good time to talk to Sumalee. I distanced myself a bit from the rest and I wrote her a message to which she responded almost immediately.

“Good morning.”

“Hey!”

“Can I call you?”

“Yes, of course.”

I got out from the cafeteria and called her while walking through the halls.

“How are you?”

“Fine. And you?”

“Very tired, I couldn’t sleep much.”

“How come?”

“I was thinking about yesterday.”

“It was good, right?”

“Yes, I had a blast, but you left me a little puzzled.”

“How come?”

All right, here it goes. The moment of truth. My motto in these cases was, sincerity takes you where you should be or where you'll end up being, so the sooner the better. With all the consequences.

“I don’t know, I loved kissing you, I really wanted it, but then I got the impression that something stopped you. Maybe I rushed and I shouldn’t have done it so soon. We only know each other for two days ...

“No, no, no. I loved it.”

“Then why the face later?”

“Nothing ... I was tired and it was getting late and we had to get out of the park while there was still light. That's all.”

“Are you sure? Sumalee, I don’t want to pressure you. We can go at the pace you want, but I need you to be honest. I hate lies, for better or for worse.”

For a moment she didn’t say anything. The wait drove me crazy.

“Sumalee?”

“Yes, yes. Honestly, it was nothing. I loved the kiss.” It was a very fun day with a very special ending.”

“I really liked it too. I mean everything. Not only the kiss. The market, the delicious meal at your friend’s, Kai-Mook, restaurant and the bike ride through the park ... and of course the kiss. That was the best part. Would you like to meet again?”

“Of course!” She said with the jovial voice that I liked so much to hear, “but I can’t until Wednesday. I have a lot of work.”

“Until Wednesday! Alright, alright. I'll try to hold out until then. If you want, I invite you to dinner.”

“I think it’s a very good idea. Where?”

“Well, I'll let you know tomorrow or Wednesday morning. I have to find a nice place to live up to your friend’s restaurant.”

“Sounds good, we’ll talk. I have to go because there are customers entering the agency. Kisses.”

“And one for you.”

I heard the sound of the kiss through the phone. Although it was virtual it tasted like glory. I was not sure what to make of the conversation because at first, she seemed reserved and cautious,

but then she turned into the giggly Sumalee. In the end, one believes what they want to believe. I put the phone in the pocket and walked toward my desk with a smile from ear to ear thinking that the time passes as quickly as possible to see her on Wednesday. When I told my roommates how the conversation went, immediately they congratulated me that nothing was wrong and Josele took it upon himself to find a different kind of restaurant where I can take her.

The day flew by. I felt as if I was floating on a cloud. Every time I closed my eyes, I relived the kiss, the soft touch of her lips between mine. Just thinking about it I gave me goose bumps.

Jerome, Damaso and other co-workers were going to grab a drink after work. As there was not much else to do, I went with them. We went to a pub that looked just like any pub on the street corner of London, with the difference that half the clientele was Asian. And that the alcohol was very expensive. Many people drank in the streets, which was legal and happened mostly on one of the bridges connecting the Clark Quay area, area of choice for tourists, or going to a street vendor to buy Tiger beer. Afterwards they went to the nightclubs once they had enough alcohol in the system, like I used to do in Madrid when I was young. In our case, since the apartment was paid for, money was not a problem.

We played some pool and darts, which kept me entertained until I went home. There I picked at some food from the fridge and soon went to bed. With no sleep the night before and such party, the body was collapsing. Just before getting into bed I wrote to Sumalee to wish her good night. She sent me a drawing of an oriental girl blowing a kiss that caused me euphoria and warmth on the inside and I sent her one as well. I slept like a baby.

Next day I woke up full of energy. We left for work, but I got off a couple of stops before. I felt like moving a little. I needed it. Besides, this way I could see a little more of the city. The street was full of Westerners going to work. That was not surprising considering that 40% of Singapore's population was made up of expatriates.

I spent the day working nonstop and dragging along poor Jerome with my energy, who had not gone to bed as early as me and had a hangover. When I finished work, I was still hyperactive, but I couldn't convince anyone to do something interesting except Damaso to play tennis, so we went home, and we ran over an hour around the court. Damaso beat me, but I did not care. All I needed was a little relief. However, he reminded me about his victory several days, regretting that he did not bet before we started.

An American colleague, Sam, told me about a place that seemed great for my date with Sumalee the next day. With the issue of the place solved and since I had nothing else to do, I called my mother, told her how the last few days had been, but said nothing about Sumalee so that she didn't begin with a fantasy movie wedding and many grandchildren, and spent the rest of the afternoon and night playing poker, Texas hold'em, in the living room, the three of us with Shen, a very nice Singaporean neighbour, of Chinese origin. I was able to do better than in the tennis match and, while at it, won enough to pay part of the next day's dinner. Damaso did not take it very well, he was quite competitive. He kept saying that for weeks now he's been going through a rough patch, although we did not know what he was talking about since it was our first game. Yes, he paid what he owed.

I felt like hearing Sumalee before going to bed, so I called her.

"Good evening, Sumalee."

"Hello Davichu!"

"How do you know about Davichu?" That does not come in books.

"What do you think, I can't investigate?" She said putting a face as if she had never broken a plate. "I have told my Portuguese co-worker about you and she speaks Spanish and has lived many years in Spain."

"Oh, yeah, and what else has she told you?"

"Things about Spaniards. And I will tell you when we meet. She has also taught me how to say hello in Spanish: Houla."

“Almost, almost,” I said smiling. “Tell her to correct your pronunciation and let’s see if tomorrow you can say it well.”

“Do you know where you are taking me?”

“Yes, I don’t know if you've been there, but I found a very original place that reminds me of my country.”

“Where?”

“It's a surprise, or at least I hope so. Tomorrow you’ll know.”

“Don't leave me this way! Give me a clue at least ...”

“Okay. You'll have to earn your food.”

“What?”

“That's the clue beautiful. If I make it too easy the surprise is ruined.”

“Alright, alright. Where do we meet?”

“How about at 7:30 p.m. at the Seng Kang subway stop?”

“So far north? The curiosity is killing me, but I will endure until tomorrow. Sounds good! I'll come right after work.”

“Me too. See you tomorrow then. A big kiss.”

“Kisses David.”

Sweet dreams Sumalee, I thought as I hung off the phone. Sweet dreams.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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