

# Lisu Hill

By Dante Harker

Some bruises never go away

‘What does that sign say? Did it say ‘Camp Death?’ I bet it does.’ Mark asked as they passed a sign in Thai script. He had aimed the question at all the occupants of the pickup truck, but the roar of the 4x4s engine stopped anyone other than Mark’s partner, Keith, being able to hear.

‘Don’t say things like that?’ Keith said as he clung to the back of the truck, dodging the other guest’s knees. There was only room in the trucks cabin for two and some luggage, which hadn’t bothered the six guests, who had relished the idea of sitting out in the open as the truck took them up to the mountain retreat.

At least they had relished the idea last night, before a heavy drinking session – this morning was a different matter. Before getting into the truck they’d been told that they could stand up, enjoy the sights, but risk feeling sick, the road up to the camp being nothing more than 30km of muddy mountain track, no tarmac just a steep, continuous slope full

of potholes. Or they could sit down, which Mark and Keith had chosen to do, the other four people in the truck had decided to stand, so for the last one-and-a-half hours the couple been bounced and bashed, risking head-butting the truck on one side and a face full of knee on the other.

‘Why not? This place is bound to look like something out of a horror film, out here in the middle of nowhere.’ Mark said just before he took another knee to his temple.

‘Well, people might hear you, that sign was in Thai, it could say something sacred.’

The pair had wanted to stand up shortly after they truck had set off. The 4x4 had come to a convenient stop but before they could get to their feet, the driver and the guide started piling in bags of supplies, this left no room to stand, they had even been asked if they were okay holding a bag each of breakables, which truly made standing up impossible.

‘Look at the place though, it’s just wooden huts on the top of a mountain – nothing says “killing spree” to a crazed murderer like huts in the middle of nowhere!’ Mark held up the camp’s advertising leaflet for Keith to see, then realising he wasn’t interested, he put it down and checked the contents of the carrier bag on his knee, he was sure he’d heard eggs crack after that last bump in the road.

‘Have you broken them?’ Keith asked after noting the look on Mark’s face.

‘There’s a good chance. Still, if you’re stupid enough to put eggs on the back of a truck what do you expect!’ Mark replied.

‘I think they expected you to keep them safe.’ Keith quipped back.

‘Well, the leaflet promised me “A beautiful tropical hideaway, free from the noise and pollution of Chiang Mai, a chance to stay with one of Thailand’s ancient hill tribes.” This leaflet forgets to mention the hellish journey to get here.’

‘Will you stop moaning? In fact, it’s my fortieth tomorrow, if you practice not moaning from now, you might have it down by then!’

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‘Those two are still at it!’ Freddy said, he was trying to speak without making any actual noise, his head pounding from a well-deserved hangover brought on by last night’s drinking session. He’d chosen to stand up in the hope that wind in his face would help clear out his tortured head. Plus, he’d been sick twice this morning already, so hoped he was safe from

a repeat of that.

'I guess that's what happens when you've been together fifteen years; you get to jibe at each other as much as you want.' Amber smiled, for two reasons really, one in the hope that she wouldn't have to explain that last point any further, as much as she liked a drink, last night's session was a real blinder and she really wanted time to blank out and stare into the distance. The second reason for the smile, the one that actually lit up her entire face was who she was casually brushing her body up against Freddy, the American Jock.

They hooked up last night, not that either of them could remember much about it. The hill tribe home stay had a guest house in Chiang Mai and most people who were going to spend a couple of days trekking through the jungle, staying with the hill tribe, stayed at the guest house first.

The guesthouse, attractive (if a little cramped) had ten double rooms though, as it wasn't quite at the end of Thailand's wet season, only half the rooms were full. And out of the guests staying, eight were making their way up to the hill tribe the next morning. The staff who worked at the guesthouse seemed a cross between guides and pushy travel agents. They were keen that everyone who stayed at the guesthouse spent at least a couple of nights on the mountain. They smiled, served drinks and cajoled until guests agreed it was a good idea. Of course, when you give

most people enough drink they'll thing almost anything a good idea.

Amber hoped that she was more than one of Freddy's drink-induced good ideas. He was tall, her age, 23, with blond hair just the right length to run your fingers through – Amber desperately wanted to run her fingers through it now, despite the hangover, and her fingers being covered in mud from gripping onto the side of the truck. His eyes were like deep blue oceans that begged to be swum in; Amber thought Freddy must have stepped right out of the pages of the Abercrombie and Fitch catalogue.

'I am what I eat, more like,' Amber whispered to herself after deciding that if she was going to be a model, it would be the 'before' person for whatever was the current dieting show. When Amber had left the UK to go travelling, one TV show was doing its best to make the populous feel bad, by proclaiming you resemble your diet, this made Amber a concoction of beer, kebab meat and chips – though since Amber had been in Thailand she was mostly made up of cheap spirits, that and the odd dish of rice or noodles to keep her strength up.

The show had once inspired Amber to spend a bewildered five minutes in a health food shop. The brief time she was in there had been taken up trying to work out how dried fruit, which looked like rabbit droppings after a week in the sun,

could possibly be good for you. But then after catching a glimpse of dried organic apricots, their skin covered in deep wrinkles, their misshaped body a washed-out mustard yellow, Amber did at least work out the presenter of the show's favourite food.

The truck climbed through verdant rice paddies, steadily creeping its way to the top of the mountain. As it rounded the next corner a low gasp went up from the 4x4s occupants as a view down the entire mountainside unfolded. Lush green jungle, gave way periodically to tiny villages containing a selection of ramshackle buildings, each with its own neatly tended vegetable plot.

'What do you mean they can just jibe at each other as much as they want?' Freddy asked when the truck slowed to ready itself for the next steep climb.

Amber wasn't sure what he was talking about, it had been at least ten minutes since either of them had spoken, both had been lost in the beauty of their surroundings and a shared need to keep their headaches under control.

'Oh right,' she started after her tired brain handed over what they had last been talking about, 'I just meant that when you've been with someone for a long time, you know what you can get away with. I think you can be nastier, because you know it's unlikely that you're going to split up.'

'Oh, I see,' though Freddy wasn't sure he did. Or at least the man playing drums in his head wasn't letting him fully understand. He looked down at Amber, watched as her nose ring glinted in the sun and wondered what he'd done. The used condom he'd skidded on this morning on his way to the bathroom had cleared up one of the many dark voids left in his memory from last night. He was at least sure they'd had sex.

The night was a drunken blur. He couldn't remember any of it with absolute clarity. He turned his head and looked down at the two men bickering. The guilty smile that broke onto his face as he watched the truck's bounce causing Mark to bash his head into the side was quickly punished by his own head erupting in retaliation of the facial movement. Freddy winched at the pounding in his head and wished for a handful of painkillers, or failing that a beer to help numb the pain.

He looked at Keith, his tall athletic frame crammed awkwardly between a sack of rice and a bag full of fly-attracting vegetables. If it wasn't for the deeply cut lines around Keith's eyes, it would be easy to believe that last night was an early thirtieth birthday celebration rather than a fortieth. The lines, though a shade lighter than the surrounding skin, gave Keith's face a mature masculinity.

‘Shit! shit! I kissed him!’ Freddy blurted, then cursed that his thought had escaped his mouth rather than stayed in his mind how he intended.

‘Memories coming back to you?’ Amber asked. She’d wondered how long it was going to take for the big jock to remember what he’d got up to last night.

‘What? No, err, no.’ Freddy stumbled; the shock of kissing a man seeming to take away his ability to speak. He was a football player, not quite a star and never the team captain, but good enough to get a scholarship that saw him through college. He’d never kissed a man before, hugged plenty, showered with more than he would like to mention, but kissing just wasn’t something one man should do with another, at least not on the mouth, and certainly not with tongues – it’s against God!

‘I saw you kiss Keith last night,’ Amber said. She knew Freddy would never own up to it. A good mid-American boy, she thought it was a minor miracle he’d found his way out of the States at all, never mind to go travelling, but actually seeing him kiss a man last night had been a real shocker. A challenge to the stereotype she applied to all men from America’s Bible belt. Still, she had only met the man the day before and even though they had sat and chatted for hours on the night bus up from Bangkok, she knew her opinions of him were recent and sure to change.

‘What was I doing kissing a man? Was it a dare?’ Freddy knew deep down it wasn’t, he knew that for some reason he’d thought it okay to give Keith a birthday kiss. Acceptable in itself perhaps, if it had been done as a joke while in the company of others, but as the fog cleared from his memory, he remembered that he’d followed Keith to the toilet to kiss him in private and used tongues.

‘No, it wasn’t a dare, and I only know about it because I followed you to the toilet. I thought you’d heard me say I’d come with you, but obviously not.’ Amber had followed Freddy with the same intention as his – to get a kiss. Of course she had no excuse other than she fancied him, no convenient birthday to give her reason, still, she had been so drunk last night that any sense of reason had gone out the window.

A light mist of rain cooled Freddy’s face. He looked up at the sky, one lone cloud, lost against the bright blue sky fought to make its presence felt. The rain lasting seconds before the heat of the sun burnt through the cumulus. The cool brought temporary calm and clearer thoughts.

‘I was wasted last night, no clue what I was doing. And I can’t remember any of it with any detail and that suits me fine.’ Freddy was from Carlton, a town fifty miles from Austin Texas, where most people had strong, drawling accents,

stretching out individual words, so that even forming a basic sentence seemed like it took most of the morning. As Freddy spoke his accent and country of origin were apparent. However, having spent most of his summer vacations growing up with family in Scotland, and spending time with his Spanish au pair, his accent had flattened and speeded up to the point where it could now be described as 'non-descript American.'

The slight extension of the word 'any' had been enough to antagonise Amber. Clearly she was just another part of last night which Freddy wanted to forget, not that she remembered their encounter either. She remembered the bar closing, and then telling everyone that she had a bottle of Laos whiskey back in her room. Somewhere in her mind she found a vague memory of a bunch of people dotted around her room drinking. There was the taste of whiskey, the after-taste of which was still in her mouth and kept promising to make her vomit. But that was it, the next she remembered she was lying face down on the bed, her face and hair covered in vomit with Freddy asleep at her side. He had found the condom and after sliding on it, he'd picked it up and given her a 'well, we must have' look. Amber had hoped they must have, at least she had until he'd drawn out that word 'any'.

In retaliation at being considered forgettable Amber said, 'you know it was straight after that kiss that we must have

had sex,' it wasn't, at least an hour must have passed, but Amber knew she could play on Freddy's memory lapse, 'are you sure you weren't thinking about Keith?'

'Fuck off, don't be stupid!' Freddy snapped, and then shocked at his own outburst, it not being his nature to swear at women, he offered, 'sorry about that, my hangover got the better of me.'

The speed and ferocity of his reply wasn't lost on either of them and just as Amber was about to make a trite remark about him protesting too much, the truck pulled to a bumpy halt at the base of a near insurmountably steep hill. At the top of which a sign heralded that they'd arrived at 'Lisu Hill'.

## Chapter two

### Man whore

'I can't breathe! My lungs are burning!' Mark gasped when he finally made it to the top of the hill. At the bottom the guide had asked if any of them had wanted to walk up. Keith and Mark had jumped at the chance, desperate to avoid further head bashings. Freddy had waited until Amber decided to stay put and then hopped down from the truck. The final couple, Armando and Emilia were Spanish and had very little spoken English. At the suggestion to walk up the

hill they had smiled and with little understanding of what they'd been asked, Armando had said in broken English 'we go hill.' The Thai guide, unsure of whether that was a yes or no, had hesitated for a second and when he saw the couple weren't moving he'd got back in the 4x4 and started the drive.

'Yeah, it's so great to get the heart pumping!' Freddy said as he bounced past Mark and Keith.

'It's such a shame murder isn't legal.' Mark muttered in reply to Freddy's youthful exuberance while he still tried to catch his breath.

'Oh leave him alone, the boy's cute.' Keith replied once Freddy had moved off to meet the others who were getting down from the truck.

'Oh, why don't you just fuck him?' Mark snapped. He was sick of how much time Keith spent objectifying younger men. Even though technically he was a younger man, but he knew he was at least ten years' older than Keith's preferred age.

'Oh, I might, perhaps he could be my fortieth birthday present?' Keith replied; his tone airy as if his mind was already unwrapping his present.

Mark took a deep breath, which at last returned his breathing to normal. Then after glaring at Keith, he went off to join the others who were now sat around a long wooden table, in an open-sided building sign- posted as the restaurant. The building was dug into the mountainside, and accessed from the road on which they'd arrived on. The road continued past the restaurant and wound its way up through a tatty village of wooden houses with corrugated iron roofs. Three sides of the restaurant were open, one overlooking the village while the other two offered amazing views down a steep valley of jade-green jungle.

While Mark stood in the restaurant and looked over the wonder that unfolded in front of him, Keith turned around and from the top of the hill did the same. Both shared the same thoughts. Coming on this holiday as a final attempt to rebuild their failed relationship was a really bad idea.

The couple had been together for fifteen years and at least some of that time had been happy. But now, staring out over such magnificence, both men knew they had wasted the last five years of their lives.

'Ok, so if we need something to spice up our sex lives what about having a threesome?' Keith had suggested one dark winter's night and from that suggestion the rot grew. Several attempts further down the line and they started to realise

that they had very different tastes. Mark liked older men, Keith liked younger. Mark wanted to have sex with forty-year-olds and Keith wanted guys in their early twenties. The threesome idea never quite got off the ground, but the having-sex-with-other-men idea flourished.

Again a single sentence had passed judgement on the relationship, this time from Mark:

‘Well, I guess its ok for us to have sex with other guys, just as long as the other one doesn’t find out.’

A month ago, when he’d come home to find Keith still inside another guy, one who looked young enough to be his son, Mark’s resolve finally broke. He realised he’d become everything he hated about being gay. He’d fallen for the idea that it’s okay to have sex with other guys because you only ‘make love’ to one person, your partner. For years he’d told himself that it was straight people who had it wrong, that the only way to have a successful relationship, one with a fulfilling sex life was if that sex was with a range of other people. Of course more than fifty per cent of straight relationships involve having affairs, but the difference was that they are rarely spoken about, whereas Mark and Keith had spent the last few years openly cruising gay websites to find their next encounter.

What he hadn't realised was that sex is not a thing that is just done to service need. It involves other people, feelings, emotions, and the development of relationships no matter how brief. More importantly, it involves the individual's time. The process of finding, wooing and then the deed itself all took time, time that should have gone into building a strong and successful relationship.

So what if the sex wasn't as exciting as it was when they first met, surely there were ways they could make it at least bearable, and though it might be utilitarian, with some effort at times it could be exciting and fun. Of course, that would take work and some acceptance that a long-term fulfilling partnership involved certain sacrifices. Perhaps the greatest sacrifice was that they would no more experience the rush of adrenalin that comes from a fresh, unexplored body.

Mark had put this argument to Keith, explained that they should both try to build a strong, monogamous relationship from this point on, or they part forever. Keith, feeling the pressure of his imminent decade change, hadn't wanted to start dating from scratch and had suggested a holiday from which to make a fresh start.

Thailand had been a bad choice. They spent their first week in Phuket, which could quite possibly be the rent-boy capital of the world. The Paradise Complex – thirty-plus gay bars and clubs that fan out from the imposing high-rise Paradise

hotel. Each bar was populated by glorified hookers, young men in tight clothes who'd do anything they could to entice men onto the premises. Once there, it was custom to buy drinks for your new 'friends' before choosing which one of the lucky guys will be your entertainment for the evening. At a cost of course, to the bar manager for taking away one of their alluring staff members and then to the boy for whatever particular delectation you'd like to partake in.

A drunk expat had explained this concept to Mark and Keith. They had been sat in one of the quieter bars overlooking the main stretch. From 11pm, and every half hour until the early hours, the largest club on the street paraded its best looking staff out onto the street. A row of fifteen men, some of them barely out of their teens, marched into the road and lined up for all to see. The rent boys faced front, then to the left and then the right; like soldiers auditioning for a porn film. The first time it happened, Mark watched as an old man worked his way down the row with a video camera, making sure he got body and face shots of all the sex workers – perhaps to aid in deciding which one to take back to his hotel.

Keith had tried his best to look disgusted, he found the expat sufficiently so – late fifties, bald, fat and, if not quite literally, figuratively drooling as the tight-vested men paraded their wares. But at the idea of young men lining up, desperately seeking his approval, willing to do anything he wanted for the right price, well there was something about that he found

truly beguiling.

Keith's resentment had built during the first week. He wanted to play with the bar boys. He was going to be forty the following week and he wanted to prove he could still please a man half his age. A huge fight followed by some tired, half-hearted make-up sex and the first week was over.

For the second week they'd flown to Chiang Mai in the north, hired mopeds, stayed away from the bars and had a decent time. However, both knew that something was missing.

'Is there sign of any staff? Or at least a clue what we're meant to do now?' Keith asked as he climbed the three steps up to the wooden restaurant. Mark didn't turn around to greet him so Keith turned towards the table and acted as if the question had been aimed at everyone.

'The guide said he'd be back in a minute to show us to our bungalows.' Amber offered, adding, 'he left us this booklet, said we had to pick which one we wanted to stay in.'

'What they like? Expensive?' Keith asked, taking a seat at the head of the five-metre table. It was a low-tech affair, roughly crafted out of heavy timber. A row of dirty plastic chairs ran down either side, the Spanish couple on one side, Freddy and Amber on the other. A few spaces down from

Amber, sat reading a book was a new face, a long-haired man in his mid-twenties. Keith could see that the guy was Asian, but as to which Asian country he was from, he had no idea. 'Mark would know,' Keith thought, cursing his own ignorant racism – Chinese, Japanese, they were all the same to him, not that he would ever say that out loud, at least not in front of anyone other than Mark, who he knew would give him a disapproving look and then laugh.

A quick look back at his partner of so many years, who was still looking out over the valley, made his heart sink. Still, at Keith's side was a very handsome American Jock, his favourite kind of American, and someone who last night had kissed him so enthusiastically.

'It seems they have two basic rooms at 150 baht, a couple of bungalows at 500 and 750 baht, though from the picture I can't tell any difference between them.' Freddy had taken the booklet from Amber and was flicking through the pages; holding the bungalow pictures for Keith to see as he quoted the prices. 'I wonder why he's looking at me like that?' Freddy thought each time he caught Keith's gaze. Freddy paused for a second, distracted by the colour of Keith's eyes, they were light gray, with green sparkles, a mixture of colours the jock hadn't seen before, the colour seemed to hold promise and foreboding both at the same time.

'Is that it?' Keith asked, he could see from the booklet that it wasn't but then his question was more a response to Freddy's eyes as they held his, what he was really saying was, 'is that kiss it? Was it a one off? Will there be more?'

'I'm sure he wants me, he does, he wants me, I can see it in his eyes,' Freddy's mind screamed. He couldn't be wanted by a man, well at least not so obviously, as a football player he'd noticed the odd lingering look from some freak or another, but this was so blatant. There had been that time when he was battling with puberty's hormonal onslaught, experimenting with his best friend, but that was a long time ago and a memory he mostly kept hidden in his mind's darkest recesses. This was real, this was an invitation.

'Oh, err, right' Freddy struggled to drag his attention to the matter at end so he could answer the literal meaning of Keith's question. 'There is one luxury bungalow, it's a 1000 baht, but it looks nice from the picture.'

'Well, I guess that's us sorted, hey Mark!' Keith said, Mark didn't reply, 'that's if no-one else wants the posh one.'

'Lo quieres?' Freddy said to the Spanish couple who had been chatting quietly to each other.

‘You speak Spanish?’ Amber asked Freddy. Adding in her mind, ‘well, you’re not just a fuck-and-run merchant, you’re a bilingual fuck-and-run merchant.’

‘Yeah, we’ve always had Spanish help,’ Freddy smiled at the bunch of memories that rushed into his head at the mention of their Spanish help. He had actually learnt Spanish from a cleaner they’d had, until his mother had found him in bed with her – something entirely inappropriate.

The Spanish couple said they were ok with one of the 500 baht bungalows.

‘What about you two, will you be sharing again?’ Keith asked Freddy and Amber, it was pretty clear from the look on Freddy’s face that they wouldn’t, but it seemed a fun question to ask.

The pair looked at each other, Freddy spoke first, ‘I think I’d rather have my own room, I could do with a good night’s sleep – I’ll take one of the 500 baht ones.’

Although she would have expected to feel slighted by this casual insult, Amber’s opinion of Freddy had already started to change and she was able to shrug it off. After the comment about wanting to forget last night, which hadn’t done her ego any favours, and now talk of what he’d learnt

from his Spanish help, Amber was more than happy to act like Freddy and put any thoughts of a further encounter out of her head. Of course, if he had said, 'yeah lets share a room, she would have gone along with it just to see what happened, but he hadn't, forcing her to say:

'That's cool, and 500's a bit rich for my blood, I'll take one of the cheap rooms.'

### Chapter three

Welcome to the cheap seats and, oh, for some scented writing paper

'Wow!' Amber said from the doorway to her room. Not that it looked much like a room, at least not a guest room, more just a wooden shed with a bed in it. The guide had given her the key and pointed her to a large dark wood building across from the restaurant.

The two cheapest rooms were up a flight of dilapidated wooden stairs. A missing third step, and broken banister rail almost saw Amber plummet into a mass of overgrown vegetation. The rooms were above the kitchen and when Amber had opened the door a whoosh of aromatic, if slightly stagnant aromas had rushed her senses.

'It's not quite so bad if you open the window,' said an anglicised Asian voice, startling Amber who was still debating whether she dare enter the grubby room.

'Oh, right, okay... err... it's a bit... grimy in there.' Amber looked down at the rough wooden floor. Usually she would take her sandals off before entering a room, but the floor's clearly visible dirt stomped on that notion. Once across the threshold things got easier, Amber made her way around the bed and pushed open the window. Sun flooded the room, a light breeze brought fresh vibrant scents and at the sight of the incredible view Amber took a seat on the bed.

'Impressive! Kind of makes you forget about the grime. I'm Okie by the way.'

'Okie, that's an unusual name?' Amber said, dragging her eyes away from the view and looking over at the man stood in her doorway. Silhouetted against the clear blue sky, Okie reminded Amber of a martial arts movie star from one of the many Kung Fu films her older brother had forced her to endure as a child. Thick, jet-black shoulder-length hair framed a chiselled face and as Okie stood with his arms out in an upright press-up position against the door frame the long sinewy muscles in his arms tensed.

'My name is much longer, I'm Japanese born but raised in Oxford in the UK. Okie's much easier for westerners to get

their tongues around.'

'You've never had your tongue around a Japanese man have you?' A little voice asked Amber from somewhere in the back of her mind. 'It would be a good way to get my mind off Freddy, and if I can pull a guy like him last night, there might be chance for me with this one.' She thought, answering the internal voice and taking the idea a step further.

'It's cute, I like it. Have you been travelling long?' Amber said, then cursed under her breath at asking the all-time clichéd traveller's question. When Okie said that he was on a year's round the world ticket and had been travelling for six months already, she bit back the urge to say, 'oh, cool, where have you been already?' This would have again seemed trite so instead she went with, 'cool, so what's been your favourite place so far?'

In front of the two rooms there was a small balcony with two chairs looking out over the valley. They moved to the chairs and the afternoon passed into early evening.

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'What am I going to do? Shit I'm talking to myself again, shit!' Freddy carried on talking to himself but this time he

moved his thoughts back inside his head which seemed more acceptable.

His 500 baht detached bungalow came with a tiled floor, clean sheets and a balcony with a view down the valley. From the edge of which he could look up and across to the luxury bungalow Mark and Keith had taken, Mark wasn't in sight but Keith had been sat sunning himself since everyone had gone their separate ways.

'I'm not attracted to a man; I can't be attracted to a man!' Freddy insisted. Keeping his thoughts bottled up in his head seemed inadequate, contained, so he went back to ranting out loud.

'I've had a woman, I've had loads of women, but last week, I had a woman last week – shit, I took her from behind, maybe that's a start.' Freddy went back to the balcony and looked up at Keith.

'Nothing, see, nothing, he does nothing for me, why would he, he's a man? And he's a fit man, no shirt, tight shorts... stop it.' Freddy said his words to the jungle but got no reply other than the screeching cacophony of a million cicadas.

Back in the bungalow Freddy lie down on the bed. It was so hot, taking Keith's lead he stripped to his underwear and let

the breeze from the ceiling fan cool his over-heated body.

In his head Freddy told himself, 'I was drunk; I just kissed him because it seemed like a cool thing to do for the guy's birthday. I didn't have sex with Amber because the kiss turned me on, she's a girl and any hole's a goal.' The implications of his last statement took a few moments to sink in.

'Men have holes, are they goals?' Freddy's deep masculine tone pieced the thick, dry air inside the bungalow. The question appeared to hang until a voice from the balcony replied.

'I think personally I tend to pay more attention to who the hole's attached to before I go diving in.'

At the intrusion Freddy jumped up from the bed and reached for his shorts.

'No need to get dressed on my account, it's nothing I've not seen before.' Keith said moving to the doorway. He had barely dressed himself other than to put on a shirt that he hadn't buttoned.

'You haven't seen what I've got before.' Freddy replied and put on a pair of shorts.

‘Is that an invitation?’

‘No, err... No, I’m not gay you know?’ Freddy wasn’t sure what to do. Until last night he would have considered himself a red-blooded American jock. College might be over, but he’d been travelling for the last eight months and in that time he hadn’t been short of female company. In fact he had made it his mission to enjoy the delights of a local woman from each of the countries he’d travelled through – he’d budgeted for it in fact.

‘I never said you were gay, but after last night I think you might want see yourself more as bisexual.’

‘This is fun,’ thought Keith, the look of confusion on the jock’s face fortifying his belief that the lad was ripe for plucking.

‘What do you mean? I gave you a kiss, that’s all, I was wasted – that doesn’t make me bisexual!’

‘Is that all you remember? A kiss?’

‘Why? What else was there?’ Freddy wracked his mind in the desperate hope that he would remember more about last night, but all he could remember was the taste of cheap whiskey – so much whiskey.

‘Wow, you really can’t remember anything else?’ Keith watched as the jock fought against his clouded memories. Sweat ran down Freddy’s gym toned muscles, his naked upper body was tanned golden brown. Keith debated making a move now, but he knew he hadn’t yet landed his bombshell – Freddy was a big fish, and they needed time to reel in.

Freddy stuttered and then said, ‘I remember following you to the restroom, doing whatever and then when I got back everyone had gone. Then I remember going to some room, not mine, lots of laughing and the next thing I remember was waking up naked at the side of Amber.’

‘What about sex, do you remember having sex?’ Keith asked, a wicked smirk holding court on his face.

‘I remember finding the used condom this morning, well tripping on it actually.’

‘Nice, and who do you think filled the condom?’

Freddy really didn’t want to let his mind show him where this was going. He didn’t want to answer Keith’s questions. He wanted to tell him to go, or at least say something to stop him looking at him like a piece of meat.

‘Just tell me what’s going on, stop dragging stuff out, if you know something tell me.’ Freddy’s tone betrayed his growing anger at the situation. Despite the near thunderous whir of the ceiling fan the room sweltered – the fan doing nothing more than moving baked air from one place to another.

Starting to bore of his cat and mouse game Keith said ‘fine, I’ll spell it out for you, there was sex last night, the filled condom is yours, but you didn’t fill it inside Amber!’

‘Shit, no, shit, that’s not possible, you took advantage of me!’ Freddy marched from one side of the bungalow to the other, he wanted to run, he would’ve if Keith hadn’t stood in his way. He couldn’t have had sex with a man, he wasn’t gay, he liked women, it didn’t make sense.

Keith laughed at the notion that he’d taken advantage of the jock. ‘Look at the size of you, you’re far too big for me to take advantage off, plus, think about it, if that were the case, surely they’d be my bodily fluids inside the condom not yours.’

‘I don’t believe you!’

‘That’s up to you; I have nothing to gain whether you believe me or not. I just thought you should know the truth. Think about it, out of the blue, you decided that it’s a good idea to

kiss a guy, maybe somewhere inside you've always wanted to. It's only natural, a bit of experimentation – surely you've done that before?'

'I would remember, and if I was in such a state that I can't remember, how come I managed to do the deed?' Freddy didn't need to hear Keith's response; he knew he was young fit and horny. And he knew from past experience that he had memories of starting sex but no memory of how it ended. He could always remember the start though, a thought that only comforted for a second as he realised the kiss could have actually been the start.

'Fine, whatever, if it happened or not, I can't remember, so I think it's best we forget about it.' Freddy reasoned.

'That's fine by me, I'm sure you haven't been sat around wondering if you're gay or not – I bet that never even crossed your mind.' Keith tried not to sound as smug as the statement made him sound. 'I tell you what if you want to know one way or the other, if you want to kiss a man, just to see if it does anything for you. Or you want me to, well, you know, do other things to see if you get excited,' Keith's eyes lingered on Freddy's surf shorts at this point, 'all you have to do is whisper the word 'now' and we can find somewhere private to help you work this out once and for all.'

Freddy wanted to scream that there was nothing to workout. He looked at Keith's naked chest through his shirt, let his eyes linger on his toned stomach, nothing. 'And maybe any hole is a goal, but surely it makes sense, at least when sober, to go for ones attached to pretty woman...' But then there was the kiss, and perhaps the sex. Thoughts spun and thrashed like water leaving a sink. Freddy wanted to lie down, go to sleep and wake up tomorrow when this was all over. And if it wasn't for the fact that he was getting hungry, that would have been his plan of action.

'I best go, I'm sure Mark's waiting for me – just remember what I said, whisper "now" and I'll help you deal with the confusion.'

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Mark heard Keith call from the balcony that he was going for a walk. For the previous hour Mark had drifted in and out of sleep. Dreams mixed with reality, images of a happy family, a dog, walks in the park, melded into the heat of the luxury room. How a room could call itself luxury when it didn't offer aircon, Mark couldn't understand. The picturesque bungalow appeared to be styled on a Tuscan villa with burnt orange walls, white tiled floors and a sumptuous four poster bed. All details that Mark would have usually found impressive, but all he could think about was how much he wanted to go home. He wanted to be somewhere he knew, somewhere

he felt safe, a place where what he was about to do would have been so much easier, given the support of his friends.

Back in the restaurant he could hear in Keith's tone that he'd wanted the American. From their balcony, Mark had watched his partner step up to Freddy's door. The impulse almost took him to scream some abuse, let the whole world know that Keith was a cheap whoring bastard!

But the time for shouting was over, as were the days of reconciliation. Mark searched through his bag and after finding a notepad and some paper he wrote:

Dear Keith,

Remember when we first met at that dinner part all those years ago? You looked so handsome, so smart and funny. You were with your boyfriend, it didn't stop you cornering me for a kiss and at the time it never occurred to me to mind. I should have left you then.

I checked your emails once, years ago. It was a week before our fifth anniversary. I didn't mean to but my computer was down and your laptop was on the side. You were in the shower, I think. You had two emails from different men, wanting you to confirm plans for the weekend. That was a weekend you said you were away on a conference.

I was young, I worked in a shop, not in an office like you, so I never thought to question why the conference was being held on a weekend. I blocked out the emails, convinced myself I'd been mistaken, that the emails were just about work. It couldn't ruin our five-year anniversary, I wanted it so badly, I wanted to flaunt to all our friends how long we'd been together. Prove to them that it's possible, that gay men can be happy and have long-term relationships. I should have known better, I should have left you then.

I know, I'm just a fool to myself, but I loved you all those years. Even after you suggested we have sex with other people, I forced myself to believe that it was for the best, that it would bring us closer together. I thought it would stop the arguments if you were having more sex.

I thought all I ever wanted was to be with you, but I was wrong. All I really wanted was what all my straight friends seemed to have, a stable relationship. So what if none of them seemed particularly happy? I wanted the norm, the ideal, I wanted to live in the straight world wanting all the things heterosexuals are conditioned to want; a nice house, car, LCD TV – I wanted it all.

You wanted cock, cock and more cock, and the younger the better! I know what you're up to now, I know as I'm crying my eyes out writing this letter that you're off trying to get in to

some cheap American whore's pants.

I just can't do it anymore. I can't be that gay cliché – the gay couple who are only interested in a third. I want to be with someone who wants to be with me, someone who loves me and would kill any man who touched me.

You're not that man, and this 'fresh start' holiday has proved it. So I hope you're happy, I hope the jock was worth it because I'm done, I'm going home. And when you arrive back, don't come to our home, because you don't live there anymore.

You know, I hope the young guys make you happy, because soon enough you'll be a sad, old man, regretting that you let go of the only man who will every truly love you.

I'm leaving you now.

Mark.

After wiping tears from his eyes, Mark toyed for a second with adding a kiss. Then he toyed with the idea of adding 'P.S FUCK YOU!' He decided on neither, instead he put the letter inside Keith's day pack and started packing his stuff. He was going to leave it on the bed, but he wanted time to get away before Keith realised he'd gone. The fact that he

wouldn't be in the room wouldn't be a clear enough clue for Keith, not if he was distracted by another. So Mark knew he had enough time to arrange a lift back down to the airport.

## Chapter Four

Oops

'Oh sorry, I didn't realise you were busy,' Freddy said to Amber when he reached the top of the creaking stairs.

'It's ok, we're just chatting; this is Okie.' Amber said, seeing Freddy reminded her of the reasons why she had been so keen to talk to Okie in the first place, to make him jealous. A fact she'd actually forgot as she'd had such a pleasant afternoon chatting.

Freddy nodded a hello to Okie and managed a brief smile before his face returned to its previous darkened demeanour. Hesitating at the top of the stairs Freddy wasn't sure whether to stay or go, he wanted someone to talk to, but he wasn't in the mood to join the happy chorus.

Perhaps sensing his dilemma, Okie got up out of his chair and said, 'I think I'm going to go for a walk before dinner, give you some time to chat with your friend.'

The look on Freddy's face stopped Amber protesting Okie's departure. It was clear there was something wrong and, though they weren't exactly friends, she wasn't about to ignore someone in need, at least not until she had satisfied her curiosity at Freddy's gloomy countenance.

Freddy smiled in gratitude as Okie walked passed him and down the stairs. He then took a seat at the side of Amber, took a deep breath and proceeded to tell her everything about his encounter with Keith. He really needed to talk to someone, get another opinion and on the night bus Amber had proven easy to talk too.

'So, we didn't have sex together?' Amber asked. She wanted to scream it! Freddy was the fittest man she'd ever had sex with, so what if she couldn't remember, she wanted the experience as a tale to tell her friends when she returned home. Freddy might be happy they hadn't had sex, though the alternative could be considered far worse, but it was a blow in the guts for Amber.

Freddy saw her question as an annoyance. He wanted her to focus on whether or not he should whisper anything to Keith.

'Well, it doesn't look like it; neither of us can remember it and you would have thought at least one of us would. So Keith's explanation seems plausible at least, and I did kiss him, I

remember that, plus, I've been feeling really strange all day.'

'But you don't fancy men – surely that's an end to it?' Amber knew it wasn't but she thought she would at least try. It was getting dark and she hadn't eaten in hours, plus her afternoon with Okie had proved so entertaining that she was keen to continue it into the evening.

'Well, I never thought I did, but I kissed a guy last night, and if what Keith said is true we went much further than kissing.' Freddy looked out over the balcony, the sun had dropped half its grandeur behind the tree line. The jungle's foliage split the sun's rays to create a kaleidoscope of colours that bathed the valley below.

'It sounds as if you've already decided what you need to do.' Amber said, trying to draw the conversation to a close.

'I guess I have. It's only one kiss, that should do it, if I have no reaction sober then I'm sorted, not gay and I can get back to, well, I'm not sure entirely what, my non-gay reality?'

On that suitably light-hearted remark, Amber suggested that they venture down for some dinner.

In the restaurant Okie sat at the long table doing his best to have a conversation with the Spanish couple. Keith sat

facing down the valley, a folded book in his lap, the setting sun proving too much of a distraction.

‘If you’re going to do it, now’s your chance?’ Amber said as they stepped into the restaurant. ‘I’ll go sit with Okie and you can do whatever it is you need to do.’

‘Will you be here when I get back?’ Freddy asked, he really wanted someone to talk to about how it went.

Amber nearly replied, ‘it depends how long you’re going to be, I don’t want to be sat around all night,’ but she decided that was a little insensitive. Instead, she nodded a yes, and then gave Freddy a gentle push in Keith’s direction and went to sit with the others.

‘Should I make conversation, or should I just say it? Should I make conversation or should I just say it?’ The question spun around Freddy’s head as he approached Keith.

‘Now,’ he whispered into Keith’s waiting ear.

‘Good choice,’ Keith replied as he got up from his seat, ‘why don’t we pop back down to your bungalow?’

Freddy followed Keith out of the restaurant and down the short slope to his bungalow, neither man spoke, it was as if

their actions were already a fait accompli.

Opening the door Freddy walked into the bungalow, he heard Keith close the door behind him, a sound that made him want to bolt through a window. 'What am I doing? I'm not gay, this is stupid, I don't want this!' Freddy's thoughts screamed. Then, as if he had spoken his thoughts out loud Keith said from behind him, 'just one kiss, that's all it is, then you'll know one way or the other.'

Turning around the jock clenched his fists at his side, his whole body felt like lead, unyielding like the day after a hard football game.

Keith stepped forward and put his hands on Freddy's shoulders. He could feel the lad was shaking. He thought about leaving, telling the jock he should go back to girls. But his libido sang too loudly – 'an American jock, a big strapping American jock, don't you even think about sending him away.'

Freddy shut his eyes, lent forward and let his lips meet Keith's. The kiss started tender, then as Freddy felt Keith's hand on the back of his head the pressure increased.

'How was that?' Keith asked when the kiss naturally ended. Freddy wasn't sure, it hadn't felt bad, just strange, different.

Physically, Keith's slight stubble had irritated his face, liking kissing a mouth surrounded by sand paper. It had been harder too, more pressure, more tongue in his mouth than he would usually get from a girl. Emotionally, there had been nothing other than the preternatural sense that something wasn't right.

'Any twinge down here?' Keith added, it was clear by Freddy's shocked expression that he hadn't known what to make of the kiss and now, having a man's hand on the front of his shorts was really too much. Keith gave Freddy a minute and then when there was no answer forthcoming he said:

'I tell you what, if you're still not sure, why don't you just stay there and I'll give you something else to think about.' With that Keith dropped to his knees and started to lower Freddy's shorts.

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'That wasn't much of a walk?' Amber asked Okie as she took a seat at his side.

'No, I bumped into Keith's partner, he was crying, we had a bit of a chat.'

'Is it ok? Where is he now?' Amber asked, realising that all the time she had been encouraging Freddy to kiss Keith; she had forgotten that Keith had a partner.

'He's gone, he said he'd left Keith a note, though he doubted he would find it in a hurry as he left it in his day pack.' Okie had a beer, as did the Spanish couple, who were doing what they could to follow the conversation. Every so often, Emily would translate things for Armando, who would gasp or laugh accordingly.

Realising his manners Okie explained the honesty system to Amber, there was a fridge in the restaurant where you can help yourself. You then mark what you've had in a book and pay when you leave. Amber helped herself to a beer.

The conversation fell silent, so after she took a few huge gulps of the biting liquid.

Without really thinking what she was saying, and as it was the thought uppermost in her mind, she started explaining everything Freddy had told her about last night. Once she had begun, she realised that she was betraying a confidence and paused.

Okie raised a quizzical eyebrow in hope that she would continue with the rest of the story.

Amber blushed slightly but, thinking that it was unlikely the Spanish couple would fully understand what she was saying, and realising that sharing something confidential could allow her to develop a personal bond and shared understanding with Okie, she continued.

Of course she embellished a little for fear of embarrassing herself in front of her new friend. She mentioned that she and Freddy had woken up in the same room, but didn't say they were both on the bed or that either of them was naked. It seemed prudent to forget all about the idea that they might ever have had sex.

She mentioned that it was a mystery that they'd found a used condom on the floor, adding that they found it outside on the doorstep ('and it could have been anybody's!') to throw suspicion off her night's activities with Freddy and to cast herself in a better light for Okie .

At the mention of the condom, Emily and Armando started a heated banter which after a few seconds led Emily to say:

'El condón es nuestro, err... Mmm, perdón, the condom, it is ours, sorry, mucho sorry.'

'What? Err, I don't understand: how can the condom be yours and Armando's?'

Okie smiled at Amber slyly, seeing the implication that she had lied and knew more about the condom than she had let on.

‘Despacio... slowly,’ Emily said.

Amber blushed, then paled. Before anyone had chance to speak again, she said more to herself than anyone else, ‘ifg they used the condom, it means Keith lied to Freddy. And worse, it means that Freddy’s down there now, doing God knows what because that lying bastard Keith tricked him into it!’

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‘STOP!’ Amber screamed as she kicked open the door.

Her actions sent a large ornamental vase crashing to the floor. Red glazed china clashed with the crisp white tiles and as quick as the commotion had began, it ended and silence held the room. Initially, Amber had considered Freddy’s actions none of her business. If he wanted to kiss Keith that was up to him even if Keith did lie. But having a pint of Laos beer inside her and a new friend to impress, affirmative action seemed her only recourse.

Freddy's shorts were around his ankles and the man practically old enough to be his father and kneeling in front of him had one hand posed to lower his CKs.

Unfortunately, Amber had only thought through her actions as far as the word 'STOP' and with that out of the way, she was unsure what to say next so, in a rush, blurted, 'Keith lied to you, the condom belonged to the Spanish couple – you never had sex with him!'

The jock looked down at Keith for some form of confirmation. And Keith's eyes seemed to say, 'oops, sorry, she's right!'

Without thinking further, Freddy punched his fist into the side of Keith's face! Keith's cheek split open, adding blood splatters to the china fragments on the floor.

'You bastard, you lying, fucked-up bastard!' Freddy's punch had dropped Keith onto his back and his words were accompanied by a pounding kick to the floored man's ribs.

After a second kick, Okie rushed forward and shoulder barged Freddy to one side. 'That's enough, any more and you'll end up in trouble.'

The jock ran from the room and was gone from sight before anyone could call after him.

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In Chiang Mai the next morning, Freddy lay on his guesthouse bed and watched the ceiling fan spin.

He'd returned to his room, collected his things and left the camp the previous evening. He had managed to avoid the embarrassment of bumping into any of the others; though he need not have worried about whether he'd meet Amber or Okie – when he passed the restaurant they seemed to be happily entwined in each other's company and oblivious to anything else.

Strangely, somewhere inside he'd kind of hoped he would bump into Keith. He felt guilty for attacking him, he realised now that punching and kicking Keith was really him attacking himself for his burgeoning feelings.

As Freddy lay on the bed his mind felt different, like a balloon full of air that, once expanded, would never return to the same constrained size.

'Still,' Freddy thought as whooshes of air from the fan bathed his face, 'this is Thailand, no better place in the world

to have fun with a newly-opened mind!

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