

CULTURE, CHAOS, AND A 30-YEAR REGRET

A Will and A Wai

*Honouring My Brother's Last
Wishes in Thailand*



S.F. BRITNELL

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Chapter 1

Trouble in Thailand

September 10, 2022, Whistler, BC, Canada

"Hi, is everything all right? It must be 2 am there?"

"I'm not sure, Susan," my sister Liz says worriedly, "I just got a call from an 'Unknown Caller'. I didn't answer it, but he left a voice message saying Jeff was in trouble!"

"Did he leave a name, number, any other information?" I ask.

"He did leave a phone number, and then garbled something about having eye surgery, but that he would try to send an email. I tried calling Jeff, but it went straight to voicemail. I have also tried the number he left several times, but all I get is 'Call cannot be completed.'" Liz's replies are getting more animated by the minute, and I am getting concerned!

We start imagining what this 'trouble' might be... an accident, has he been arrested or abducted, or could this be one of those all-too-prevalent overseas scams? Jeff has been living in Thailand for over 30 years; any of these could be possible. The last time anyone in the family heard from my brother, Charles Jeffrey Herbert Brock, known as Jeff, to

family and friends, was last May when he called Mom on Mother's Day. Who is this mystery man, and how did he get my sister's number?

"The number he was calling from started with a 'V' and I have no idea what that is," Liz says.

"It's a VoIP call, which stands for 'Voice Over Internet Protocol'; it's a way to place phone calls using the Internet," I quickly explain.

After more discussion, we decide to keep trying to reach Jeff, and hopefully, Liz will get that email with more details. I jot down the number she has so that I can Google it. We also agree not to tell our 95-year-old mother about this until we know more and end the call.

I quickly send a text and an email to Jeff and make a cup of tea, ok, I'm lying, I pour a glass of wine. My brain starts sifting through everything my family has experienced this year, from major relocations and weddings to health issues. 2022 has been an eventful year, and I have an uneasy feeling that it is not finished with us yet!

September 11, 2022, Whistler, BC, Canada

Well, that was a crappy night; my brain just would not shut off, thinking about Jeff and his 'trouble'. I check my phone, but there's nothing from Jeff. This 'not knowing' is the worst. I hope we find out more soon, but with the time differences, Thailand is 12 hours ahead of Cobourg, Ontario,

where Liz and Mom live and 15 hours ahead of Whistler, British Columbia, where my husband Gord and I have just moved ...it could be a very long day.

I get dressed, make breakfast and try the number my sister gave me. No success. Opening my laptop, I am hoping 'Google' knows something. When I enter the number in the search box, similar numbers pop up, but not this one, and they all say Singapore. A lightbulb flashes... this number has the wrong country code. The country code for Thailand is '66', and on this number, it's '65'!

I grab my phone and call Liz; it is now about 9 am for me and noon for her.

"Hi, is this a good time to talk?" I ask, making sure Mom is out of earshot.

"Yes, I was just about to call you. I got the email from the mystery man; his name is Rob Brooks. He didn't leave any more information about Jeff, but he did provide another number for someone named Matt Shepard." Liz tells me.

"I sent a text and email to Jeff last night, but there was no response. I also did a quick Google search of that phone number you gave me; I have '65' written down, but that is Singapore; Thailand is '66'. Can you check the country code again?" I ask.

"Let me look; I have '65' written down too, but the message wasn't clear; it could be wrong," Liz replies.

“What about that number for Matt, what’s the country code on that?” I ask.

“It’s ‘66’... That must be the problem!” Liz exclaims.

“I can make the call, but whoever is at the other end is expecting to hear from you and with a potential language challenge ahead, I don’t want to complicate this. We just really need to know what’s happening,” I say.

“I think you are right. Should I call Matt as well?” Liz asks.

“Maybe wait until after the other call, or if that number still doesn’t work, then call Matt. Listen to us; we are talking like we know him!” I reply.

“Ok, I’ll let you know what happens.”

“Is everything good with you and Mom?” My Mom recently moved into Liz’s home.

“Yes, she is quite enjoying the cooking and the company,” Liz chuckles.

“Who wouldn’t! All is good here; talk to you soon,” I say, ending the call.

Liz is 73 and has lived alone for many years, so this new living arrangement with Mom is an adjustment for both of them. Her small but cute bungalow in Cobourg is a bit cluttered for my taste, but it suits her perfectly. With a conservative, serious nature and a heart of gold, she is always looking after family and friends. She is an angel in my eyes.

Several hours later, a photo pops up on my phone. It's a photo showing Jeff lying in a hospital bed. Older than the last time I saw him, but it is him. I've barely looked at it when the phone rings; it's Liz.

"I waited until it was morning in Thailand, and once I changed the country code, the call went through. It was to a nursing station at the Pattaya Hospital. After some confusion with language, the nurse said that Charles (Jeff) had a 'brain bleed' 10 days ago and is paralyzed on his right side. He can speak, but is weak. She then went to his room and took that picture."

"Oh, God!" I gasp.

"She thinks he has a phone, and she will help him call me later. I didn't push for any more details; it was hard enough to figure out this much. I am just relieved to know where he is and that he has a phone," Liz adds.

"Me too! "

We exhale and chat for just a few minutes, both exhausted from the worry. Although not a great situation, we are relieved to know where he is, but frustrated that there is not more we can do.

Too early for wine, I make a coffee and stare at the picture of Jeff that the nurse sent. Other than the blue scrubs and hospital bed, you wouldn't think anything was wrong. Still handsome at 74, his blue eyes are open, and a pair of wire-rimmed glasses

are perched on his nose. I only see a few wrinkles across Jeff's forehead when I enlarge the picture, and his fair hair, although thinning, is trimmed and neat. From the angle of the picture, I can see his feet, complete with slippers, sticking out from the end of the bed due to his 6' height.

Nothing I can do at this point but wait. I pick up my current crochet project and try to distract my thoughts.

September 12, 2022, Whistler, BC, Canada

Liz calls at 9 am.

"I just talked with Jeff; his speech is good, but he is confused and has a hard time staying on topic." Liz takes a breath, and I hear her voice start to crack, "Susan, the news is not good. Jeff has 'metastatic melanoma,' and it's aggressive. They believe it started in his lungs but has spread to his liver, brain and possibly elsewhere. The prognosis is 6 to 12 months."

Then silence... Liz is emotionally drained, and I am in shock, not sure what to say. I was not expecting this! Yes, he would need meds and physio, perhaps some home care, everything you think about related to a stroke... terminal cancer was just not on my radar.

"Is there any treatment planned? I finally ask.

"They are sending him to Bangkok for some radiation treatments in a few days. After that, he will return to the Pattaya Hospital for more rehab. His doctor is investigating an ongoing clinical trial involving immunotherapy; he must

meet the criteria, and it would need to be approved by the Insurance company, so not sure about that.” Liz sounds slightly more composed as she continues, “He is in good spirits, talking about the beautiful Thai nurses, who call him ‘King Charles,’ and the incredible food.”

“Is there anything we can do?” I ask.

“He said he is getting excellent care and that Preeda, his Thai accountant, is looking after whatever else he needs. He will send me her contact information. I did ask him about Rob, and Jeff said he is his neighbour at the condo complex. He also wants me to contact Matt, who handles his Health Insurance. Jeff added that the policy is very comprehensive, so there is no need to worry. Apparently, I have Power of Attorney! He will ask Preeda to email me a copy. Jeff was noticeably tired at this point, so I told him to call whenever he needed to and that I would call him back tomorrow. He mentioned something about using ‘WhatsApp’, so I guess you will have to teach me that.” Learning new technology always makes Liz anxious.

“I will try calling him tonight. I have WhatsApp and can help you set it up. Are you OK?” I ask.

“I’m ok, still processing everything, maybe a bit numb, and I know it is time to tell Mom. I am not sure how she will handle it?” Liz replies.

“I am sorry you have to do this on your own. It won’t be easy, but I am relieved that Mom is with you and won’t be sitting

alone with this news. Text me after you talk to her, and I will give her a call," I say.

"I will let you know," Liz replies.

"Oh, and download that app, and I'll help you set it up...now go have one of those fancy coffees you like and try to relax a bit before you talk to Mom. Love you," I add before ending the call.

It is hard to know what to do because Liz and I have only had minimal contact with Jeff for over 30 years.

He was a great big brother to me, being 6 years older, which is significant when you are 6 and he is 12. In my young eyes, Jeff was my hero. With his love of sports, he would take me skiing, swimming and biking. By the time he was 18, he had left for university, and soon after, he moved to British Columbia to practice law. Retiring at 40, he sold his home in Victoria, left his Canadian life behind and moved to Thailand.

The physical and emotional distance between us has just grown over the years. I have only seen him a few times since he moved to Thailand, and any attempts to visit him have always been discouraged, with him stating that it wasn't safe. Jeff has maintained some contact with Mom, calling her a few times a year, but as far as Liz and me, it has only been birthday and Christmas cards. I have emailed him with family news and sent photos over the years, but honestly, I haven't made much of an effort either.

October 16, 2022, Whistler, BC, Canada

With wine glass in hand, I call Jeff for a video chat; it's 7 pm for me, and 10 am for him. I'm curious how the first immunotherapy treatment he had yesterday went. He did meet the criteria, including the 2-week waiting period after the radiation treatments, and it was approved by the insurance company.

No answer, but that is not unusual. He'll call me back when he sees I called.

Jeff had returned from the Bangkok Hospital on September 20th after the radiation treatments. Shortly after, there was some discussion about having him return to Canada, mainly from the insurance company. The doctors strongly advise against this and say he is not fit for travel. Jeff believes he is getting excellent care where he is. Thailand is a popular 'medical tourism' destination with state-of-the-art facilities that attract expert medical professionals from around the world.

During the past month, Mom, Liz and I have had numerous video chats with Jeff. He is very upbeat and getting stronger, but it is still hard to keep him on topic and even harder to get a word in edgewise or ask a question. He is now able to walk with assistance. The hospital even arranged to take Jeff back

to his condo by ambulance a couple of weeks ago so he could get his laptop and a few personal items.

Feeling a need to see Jeff and help in any way I could, I had cautiously broached the idea of coming to visit. To my surprise, Jeff was thrilled. When faced with one's mortality, I guess, one grabs whatever moments they can. He suggested that by January, the first round of immunotherapy treatments will be finished, and he expects to be home and feeling much better. So, my eldest son, Greg, and I have booked a trip to Thailand for January. Jeff is excited about our upcoming visit and has planned quite an ambitious itinerary, from surfing in Phuket (for Greg) to touring a Chocolate Factory. (I think that one is for me)

We have also learned the circumstances that led to Jeff being hospitalized. Jeff has a house in Pattaya but hasn't lived in it for 6 years, preferring the beachfront condo he is renting. He goes to the house weekly to tend the gardens. It was on his way back from there, as he was about to turn onto the busy main road, that he suddenly couldn't push the clutch down.

A woman he knows (his hairdresser? - this part is foggy) saw that he was in trouble and, with the help of her son, they got him to the hospital. Rob, the neighbour, found out about the situation when Jeff's truck was returned to the condo building, and he visited Jeff a few days later in the hospital, where Jeff gave him Liz's contact information.

Too late for him to call me back now. I will try him again tomorrow.

October 17, 2022, Whistler, BC, Canada

I try calling Jeff again, but there's no answer. I call Liz.

“Hi, have you heard from Jeff recently?” I ask.

“He called Mom a couple of days ago, and they had quite a long chat.”

That was our last contact with Jeff; I was glad it was with Mom.

Preeda called Liz two days later. He had suffered multiple seizures on the 17th and slipped into a coma.

Jeff died at 11:40 pm on October 19th, 2022 (Thailand time).

Chapter 2

'I will go.'

October 19, 2022, Whistler, BC, Canada

Loss and grief, at 68, I have had my share, possibly more. Experts will talk about the stages of grief, but I think there are also degrees of loss and grief and sometimes it doesn't even involve death; it is just the end of something.

Today, I am sitting here struggling to characterize Jeff's life, with what little I know about it. I'm not even sure what degree of loss and grief I am feeling. I am sad that he has died and relieved that his ending was not long and painful, but a big part of me knows I lost him 30 years ago.

Perhaps when my end comes, friends and family may say 'She had a full life'; I'm not sure I understand what that means... I lived to a ripe old age (hopefully), had family and friends who loved and cared, and travelled ... If you ask me, I would describe my life as eventful.

I had a good childhood with a loving family. I am the youngest of three children: my brother, Jeff; my sister, Liz; and myself, Susan. We had a comfortable but not extravagant

lifestyle. I had lots of friends, fun vacations, and a healthy amount of teenage angst. When I was 16, I met my husband, Gord. We went to the same high school and hung out with the same group of friends. Typical of a youthful relationship, we had our drama, but married 7 years later in 1977.

The first time death came knocking at the door was less than a year after our wedding. Our daughter, Kim, was born in August 1978; two weeks later, Gord's mother died from a brain aneurysm at 52. Shocking and devastating, especially for Gord and his family. For me, still today, it was a big loss... a compassionate, capable and generous woman, who I was just beginning to get to know, the grandmother that Kim (or future children) never would.

Three years later, death leaned on the doorbell and refused to let up! Kim was three and a half when we had twin boys, Greg and Richard, who were born in December 1981, healthy and beautiful. As you can imagine, life was hectic, and I had little sleep, but with help from my mom, I was managing. In March of 1982, when they were just over 3 months old, I had put them down for their morning nap, and only Greg woke up! Our baby, Richard, died from SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome).

This is a whole other degree of grief...I am not even sure I can describe it...you are screaming both inside and out with so much pain. You are so angry that there is no comfort found in the well-meaning words or actions of others, and it is impossible to justify. Then there is the guilt. I was his

mother, and this happened on my watch. It didn't matter how often I was told that it was nothing I had done; the guilt was tangible. It is true...you never get over the loss of a child.

Gord and I didn't handle this well. Each was dealing with this loss in our own way. He headed to the basement, hammered in nails and didn't want to talk about it. On the other hand, I needed to talk about it and convince myself that I was strong, and this would not break me. I don't think Greg left my arms for the next three months, likely both for comfort and believing this would keep him safe. All the while, Kim was quietly witnessing our despair, and neither Gord nor I could handle our own grief, let alone help her with her feelings.

As time went by, the day-to-day seemed normal enough, and the children appeared to be thriving, but there was a distance between Gord and me that I am sure they felt. Two years later, in December 1983, we had another son, Steve. Gord and I soldiered on while slowly growing further apart. Eventually, the arguments and accusations started as I was sliding into a depression; the marriage was crumbling.

In early 1989, we separated and would eventually divorce. We worked out a co-parenting arrangement, and I left. A growing relationship between Gord and the woman who lived next door made it impossible for me to stay. Taking only my personal belongings, the good china and our late son's ashes- those last two items for safekeeping. This was grief and loss of a different kind. A sad and painful ending, a sense of

failure, combined with the knowledge of the hurt caused to our children.

If you are wondering if we were divorced... how am I married to him today?? Hang on... we will get there.

Shortly after leaving, I rented a condo within walking distance of the house. Six months later, things were improving. The kids enjoyed coming to the condo with its 2 pools. The co-parenting was working out, but the emotional turmoil between Gord and me was still evident. I had received a promotion; I was a Medical Technologist at the local hospital and was now a manager of one of the departments. This was great because there is no shift work involved, and it was easier to get the kids to school, hockey, and other activities.

Soon after, down by the pool, I met a nice, age-appropriate man...Can I say, 'Love at first sight'? I was totally smitten. As it turned out, he, Don, lived in the condo right across the hall from mine...I know, man across the hall, hard to believe, but it is true! It seems he was also quite taken with me. What followed was a whirlwind romance...complete with tropical vacations, ski chalets, lakefront cottages, and even a new car...I kid you not, he showed up at my work one day with a car, not just any car, but a sexy black convertible sports car, saying it was better suited to my personality! He liked to live large, and I admit it did wonders for my shattered self-esteem and confidence. Don pushed me over the hump, and I was back together again. He had 3 children and had

been separated for several years, and it was through him that I learned how to navigate that situation better. The boys seemed to adjust well, but Kim, I believe, felt uncomfortable and possibly intimidated by his older daughters and, over time, participated less.

The relationship moved fast, and we bought a home with a small acreage north of Toronto in August of 1993. It needed work, so we kept his condo until we could get some of the renovations done. It was only about two weeks after we had taken possession of the house that I noticed the side of Don's face drooping and his speech slurring. Don was only 41, but this looked like a stroke. I got him into the car and drove to the hospital.

Within a few days, they gave us the news—he had a malignant brain tumour, with a prognosis of 6 to 12 months. (sound familiar) He wanted to spend his remaining time at our new house, so I got us moved, and Gord even helped.

Don died there 6 weeks later, on October 13, 1993. This was another tough one; it was difficult to watch his decline over those six weeks, from a vibrant, strong man to not being able to walk or speak. Don rarely slept, and I was exhausted and overwhelmed. When he died, I think there was a moment of relief; he was at peace, and now I could rest. Then I just went numb. I don't have any idea how the memorial service was arranged or who was there. I couldn't believe this could be happening; it just didn't make any sense...we were on top of the world, we had plans, we had a future, and hadn't I already

lost enough? My heart hurt, my brain was in a fog, and I started to believe I was cursed ...I'm now a widow at 39!

About a year after Don's death, I left the healthcare profession and started a small micro-farming business, growing herbs. I did have one other relationship that started around the same time, but let's say that was a huge misjudgment of character on my part.

In December 1999, my father died. This was also the last time I saw my brother. My Dad had been in declining health for several years. The caregiving was also starting to affect my mother's health. They had moved into my house, in a separate suite, to be closer and have help. It was only a couple of months later that he died there. A different degree of grief and loss; he was a man of action and pride, and his current limitations were difficult for him to accept. I was sad, but also grateful for all he had done for me over the years and the mostly good memories I have.

In 2005, I 'sold the farm' and moved the business and myself to Brighton, Ontario, where I had a home built that would fit my needs. By this point, our kids were all grown and living their lives. Gord had become a good friend over the years, and I knew I could count on him if needed. My Mom and sister both moved to Cobourg, and they were now living just 20 minutes away from me.

Fast forward to 2015, Gord, a teacher, is now 61 and preparing to retire. Always the financially responsible one,

he had determined that upon his death, his pension could only be transferred to a spouse or a dependent child. With no intention of having another child, I guess I was the only option.

After much discussion, we decided to remarry!!! We accomplished this just 2 days before he retired in June 2015. Gord sold his home and moved to Brighton around the same time. Some would argue that he never stopped loving me. I am not sure about that; however, I do know he trusts me to do the right thing for our children. He also has a great sense of humour, so at least he should keep me fed and laughing! That is how we ended up married again, 25 years later!

Together, we decided to sell the home in Brighton, Ontario, earlier this year and move to British Columbia. It was not an easy decision, having both called Ontario our home for almost 70 years. My Mom, now 95, is here. I hate the thought of being so far away, and I know this will add more responsibility for my sister, Liz. All of Gord's family is here, along with most of our friends. However, we know it is time to be closer to our children, and especially our young granddaughter, Bowie. They all live in British Columbia.

When Bowie was born in May 2019, we went to Whistler, where my son Steve and his wife Lynsey live. We visited them again in the fall and had a family vacation in Costa Rica in January 2020. Then COVID-19 happened, and it was just pictures and videos. I missed Bowie terribly.

Our home sold last April, and over the next few months, we purged through our belongings and shipped the remainder to Pemberton, a small town 20 minutes north of Whistler. The plan is to rent for a short period in Whistler, while we look for a new home in Pemberton.

In late May, Steve and Lynsey had their COVID-delayed wedding on short notice, while her parents were visiting from England. We flew out for the festivities; it was perfect.

In June, my mother and sister decided, likely partly predicated on my relocation, that Mom would move into my sister's home. Liz would have some renovations done to accommodate this new living arrangement, and then Mom would put her condo up for sale in the fall.

At the end of July, the house sale closed. Gord and I jumped in the car and headed west, for this once-in-a-lifetime road trip, or perhaps for us, the 'last of a lifetime', across Canada.

Starting in Ontario for a long sentimental goodbye, visiting old haunts around the Toronto area, then on to northern Ontario with its wilderness and glistening lakes, where many summer memories were made. We spent a few days in Sioux Lookout, where Gord's mother was born and raised.

We were carrying with us the cremated remains of our infant son (yes, I was still holding them) and Gord's father. It was our wish to release them by the 'Iron Bridge', a train bridge and local landmark, the place where his mother's ashes had been spread 44 years ago.

An emotional, and yet healing day for us both, side by side, revisiting the grief and loss of so many years ago, combined with the gentle acceptance of today.

Next, it was across the prairies and lowlands of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, where their expansive golden fields of canola, wheat, and sunflowers are a sight to behold. On to the foothills of Alberta, past the Ice fields and our first glimpses of the Rocky Mountains with glacier lakes, cascading waterfalls and rushing rivers.

We spent a couple of days sightseeing in Jasper, then commenced the last leg of the trip. We entered British Columbia via the mountain pass, complete with its hairpin turns, steep inclines, and narrow passes. I couldn't decide if I was gasping because of the spectacular vistas or from fear while 'white knuckling' the steering wheel.

Eventually, we reached the west coast of Canada with the mountains on one side and the Pacific Ocean on the other; it was breathtaking. We arrived in Whistler, a popular resort town 2 hours north of Vancouver, on August 10, and are currently renting a small suite.

Just for a little extra drama, we had barely made it through Ontario when I heard from Liz. My mother had suffered a heart attack. She was stable, but they were going to put in a stent. Amazingly, she handled the procedure well but never returned to her condo. When Mom left the hospital, she went

directly to my sister's home in mid-August. Mom's condo was just recently listed for sale.

The phone rings, interrupting my trip down memory lane.

"Jeff's lawyer in Victoria has sent me copies of the wills. I'll forward them to you. I also just talked to Preeda and found out that a family member, along with the Official Death Certificate, is required to release Jeff's body. The hospital will only hold the body for 7 days before handing it over to the local health authorities for 'mass cremation'. The hospital is arranging for the Certificate, but someone needs to go!" Liz is speaking quickly, with no time for pleasantries.

I am pondering what a 'mass cremation' in Thailand means. And did she say '**Wills**'- as in 'more than one'?... but I simply say, "I will go".

Chapter 3

The Wills

October 20, 2022, Whistler, BC, Canada

“I will go.” Sounds simple enough, but the reality is a bit more complicated. I open my email to look at the ‘**Wills**’, and sure enough, there are two of them.

One is Jeff’s Canadian Will, which designates my sister Liz as Executor and 4 beneficiaries: my mom, Liz, me (Susan), and Tom Smythe, a lawyer and a long-time Canadian friend of Jeff’s. Tom has been overseeing Jeff’s Canadian investments, legal matters, forwarding mail, etc., while Jeff has been living in Thailand. Jeff has always maintained his Canadian citizenship and has most of his financial assets in Canada. Liz has been informed that this includes investments and a bank account. There is no knowledge of property in Canada.

The second Will is his Thailand Will; again, Liz is named Executor, with me as the alternate. Only Liz and I are listed as beneficiaries. At this point, we know Jeff has a house, a truck and a bank account. This is an English copy of the Will. Preeda is holding the original Thai version along with other documents that Jeff had retrieved from his safe when

the hospital took him back to the condo. She has let us know that any formal documents must be in Thai, or the courts or other government agencies will not accept them.

A quick internet search reveals that according to ‘Siam Law’ (a law firm in Thailand) *‘it is perfectly legal and advisable for a Canadian citizen to have a second will that pertains only to his Thailand estate if he has assets there like money in a bank account, vehicles etc.’*, the information about owning a house or land is confusing, something about owning a building, but not the land it sits on....I will have look further into this later.

We need to figure out the Executor issue for the Thai Will. I will need the authority to make decisions regarding Jeff's final wishes and his estate... I call Liz,

“Hi, how are you doing? How is Mom?” I ask.

“I’m doing ok, Mom is pretty good. She has been saying all through this that as long as Jeff was getting good care, she was ok with whatever happened. She felt he had always made his own decisions and had lived life on his terms. She seems to have accepted his death but is grateful that they had that long chat before he died,” Liz replies.

“It’s good that she can see it that way,” I say.

“I sent an email to the hospital, informing them that we were aware of his death and that his sister would be there as soon as possible and asked them to contact me if there

were any concerns. It was in English, but hopefully, they will understand. Have you looked at the Wills?" Liz asks.

"Yes, I am assuming that you will handle the Canadian Will, but I think it might be best if I do the Thai Will. I am concerned they may not recognize me as being able to make decisions regarding Jeff's last wishes or anything else," I reply.

"I thought about that too and called a Lawyer, here in town, and he has suggested that a certified document revoking my rights as executor would be the best option. I have an appointment with him tomorrow morning. Preeda has sent me a list of documents that you need to take: your birth certificate, passport and another piece of photo ID. You will also need notarized copies of the same for me. I will get these done. Have you booked your flight?"

"Not yet, but I did check, and it looks like flights leave at night; no direct flights available. It's next on my 'to-do' list. I want to make sure I have all the documentation, plus there are a couple of things that I need to deal with here," I say.

"I appreciate you going. You are always up for a little adventure anyway, right?"

"That depends on your definition of adventure! Just make sure you answer the phone if you get any late-night calls from Thailand," I reply with a chuckle.

Gord and I had recently found a townhome in our preferred location in Pemberton. It is for sale privately. We went

and viewed it a few days ago and had just received the related 'Owners Rules and Regulations' manual for review. If everything was fine, we intended to make an offer. There is no way we can proceed with this now, so I need to make the call and return the manuals. Disappointed for sure, but what can you do?

This is a solo trip; my son, Greg, is unable to come, and Gord does not want to come. We also need to find another rental, as our current term ends on December 1st with no option to extend, so he will need to arrange that.

I log in to Air Canada and book the earliest flight I can make. It leaves Vancouver at 11:20 pm tomorrow (Vancouver time), has a stopover in Taipei and arrives in Bangkok on October 23 at 9:30 am (Thailand time). It is over 17 hours of travel time including the 2-hour stopover, and I think a day disappears!

I also need to go to the bank; I have no idea how much a cremation costs in Thailand. Jeff had told me previously, when we were discussing the January trip, to bring Canadian funds and that the exchange kiosks in Pattaya would offer a better rate than the Canadian banks. The Thai currency is the 'Baht', and although credit cards are accepted at hotels and larger venues, cash is recommended for most things.

October 21, 2022, Whistler, BC, Canada

We have engaged Preeda's services to guide me through the final arrangements and help me settle Jeff's estate. She and her Canadian husband, Paul, will pick me up from the airport in

Bangkok. I am curious to meet this seemingly smart, capable woman, whom my brother trusted and spoke so highly of.

Rob and Mark have also both offered their assistance. Mark Allen is Australian and a long-time friend of Jeff's in Thailand. He is the only friend we have ever heard about over the years. Mark is also having some health concerns and has been in Australia for treatment since August, but he will be back in Thailand in a couple of days. Mark heard that Jeff had died from Rob and was shocked; he had seen Jeff before he left and said he seemed fit and healthy.

Liz has sent me photos of the documents that the lawyer prepared; however, the quality is terrible. I have sent her to an office supply store to get them scanned and sent electronically.

Almost ready; I need to finish packing, download some entertainment for the flight and say my goodbyes. I am going to miss Bowie so much. We have been having a lot of fun together, and she is the 'apple of my eye.' I will need to bring her back something special.

Gord takes me to the Whistler Bus Loop to catch the shuttle to the airport at 5:30. After a quick hug, I climb on board for the 2-1/2 hour ride to the airport. I am anxious about what lies ahead, but also relieved, feeling a sense of purpose instead of the helplessness of being so far away.

Arriving in plenty of time, I check my bag and wander around before proceeding through security. Vancouver Airport is one of my favourites, not too big, and it has lots of interesting

art and cultural exhibits. Eventually, I go through security and head to the boarding gate.

The flight is delayed about an hour, but finally, we board. Unless they can make up some time on this route, it is going to be extremely tight for my connection in Taipei. The plane is full, and any hope of getting a little extra room flies out the window. The first leg of the flight to Taipei is 11 hours, and I do manage to sleep for a few hours.

The flight arrives late in Taipei, and as I walk off the plane, I see an airport employee holding a sign with names on it, including mine. She whisks us through the airport, including immigration and security. I'm slightly winded from trying to keep up with this fast-moving high-heeled woman. I board the next plane for the 4-hour flight to Bangkok.

Thailand is just beginning to open again to tourism since COVID-19, but the situation is tenuous, with requirements and rules changing on short notice. Currently, proof of vaccination and masks in all public spaces and the current tourist visa limit is 30 days.

October 23, 2022, Thailand

I arrive in Bangkok at 9:30 am (Thailand time). After disembarking and going through customs and immigration, I head outside to find Preeda. There are scores of people holding signs for tour group meet-ups, hotel transportation services, etc., by the exit, but I don't see my name. Outside, it is warm but not uncomfortable; the pollution is palpable with

a distinct odour and a layer of smog overhead, making the sky appear yellow.

Now, you need to understand that I do not know what Preeda looks like, and she does not know what I look like...that was poor planning; this is one time I should have risen above my aversion to selfies and sent one. I am feeling rather conspicuous; not too many older white-haired women here!

After 15 minutes of aimless wandering, I see a woman walking toward me, and I know instantly that she is Preeda. She is petite and elegant, probably under 5 feet tall, with long, luxurious dark hair, wearing a royal blue tailored suit with a white silk camisole underneath, and she walks confidently in her high-wedge-heeled sandals, perfectly matched to her outfit. A few feet behind her, trying to keep up, is Paul. Maybe 65, with an average build, wearing shorts and a shirt, he somehow fades into the background.

As Preeda approaches, I can see her brown eyes with long dark lashes; she is wearing minimal makeup with just a hint of lipstick. I am guessing she is around 40 years old. Holding a phone in one perfectly manicured hand, she reaches out the other and smiles. We exchange greetings and condolences, then head to the parking garage.

Preeda is driving; she has a cushion on her seat to raise her, and two phones are sitting in the console. The parking space is tight; she backs up, allowing Paul to get in the passenger seat, and I am seated in the back. She skillfully maneuvers the

pillars and the exit ramp, and we are on our way to Pattaya, a 2-hour drive southeast of Bangkok.

As she merges onto the fast-moving, busy toll highway, Preeda informs me that we will go to the hospital first to let them know that a family member has arrived. Then we will go to the Temple to speak with the Monks to find out when the next 'Burning' will be so that we can arrange the cremation.

And here I was envisioning a shower and a nap. I suspect I am going to be experiencing Thailand quite differently from most visitors.

Welcome to Thailand, the land of smiles!

Chapter 4

A 'Wai'... or 'Smile and Nod'

October 23, 2022, Pattaya, Thailand

The conversation is comfortable as we head down Intercity Motorway 7 toward Pattaya. I learn that Preeda and Paul met on an online dating site a couple of years ago and have only been married for a short time. They have recently purchased some land on the western side of the Gulf of Thailand, where they are building a home and plan to raise chickens. Somehow, even though we have just met, I get a sense that this is not Preeda's idea, but she is supportive. After a few minutes, we settle in for the drive to Pattaya. Leaving the haze of Bangkok behind us, it is a beautiful day with clear blue skies and the sun is glistening off temple roofs in the distance.

The sound of screeching brakes and a forward jerk brings me out of my post-flight delirium as Preeda's car comes to a halt not more than 6 inches from the black SUV in front of us. She gets out to make sure she didn't hit it, and Paul doesn't move. No damage, and other than a bit shaken, we are all fine. The

SUV is not so lucky; it hit the vehicle ahead of it and sustained significant damage.

Any thoughts of possibly driving Jeff's truck while I am here were ended right then.

According to the World Health Organization, *“Thailand ranks ninth out of 175 WHO member countries for road traffic deaths. In 2021, the WHO estimates indicated 18,218 road traffic deaths, an average of 50 per day”*.

The main roads and highways are in good condition and well-maintained, but drivers are impatient, and seatbelts, although mandatory, are rarely worn. There are many motorcycles and scooters on the roads, most carrying more than two people, and the riders are often without helmets.

After making sure everything is fine with her car, Preeda climbs back in, maneuvers around the damaged vehicles, and we are once again on our way to Pattaya.

Located on Thailand's eastern Gulf coast, Pattaya is known for its beaches and is a popular tourist destination. As recently as the 1960s, it was a quiet fishing village, but today it has grown into a bustling city with a total population of over 320,000, complete with resort hotels, high-rise condos, shopping malls, cabaret bars and 24-hour clubs. A notable nearby hillside temple, Wat Phra Yai, features an 18 m-tall golden Buddha and is commonly referred to as Buddha Mountain. The area is also home to several designer golf courses. There is a large percentage of expats living here, from Europe, Asia, North

America, and Australia, the majority of whom are men who enjoy the relatively low cost of living, the variety of outdoor activities, nightlife, and, of course, the beautiful Thai women with their kind and caring nature.

“Preeda, would it be possible to stop at a money exchange kiosk?” I ask.

“Yes, we will pass several on the way to the hospital.”

“Thank you. What happens when we visit the monks to arrange the cremation? Am I dressed appropriately?” I’m starting to get nervous about this, as I am not very familiar with Buddhism and don’t want to misstep.

“I will go in alone and speak with the monks to find out about the cremation and what the ‘donation’ amount is.”

I am relieved, as Preeda goes on to explain some basic Temple rules: modest clothing with shoulders and knees covered, either pants or a dress/skirt; shoes need to be removed; and never touch a monk, the statues, or the artwork in a temple. I am so relieved that Preeda is guiding me, and her English is excellent. My Thai skills are nil!

Eventually, we exit the highway and weave our way through the city streets, stopping at a Foreign Exchange kiosk. I convert some Canadian dollars to Thai Baht, and we head to the hospital. With masks on, Preeda leads us to the main lobby and has me take a seat in the waiting area, while she goes to the counter. I can see her in conversation and gesturing towards

me. Preeda returns and tells me that they are still waiting on the official death certificate, but they expect it soon.

We are then greeted by another hospital employee, a woman, who greets me with a 'wai' and guides us up to the floor where Jeff had been cared for. Two nurses in crisp white uniforms meet us as we exit the elevator, and with kind but sombre expressions, they convey their sympathies wordlessly and then lead us to Jeff's room. At this point, the reality of his death hits, and after several moments of reflection, thinking of the pictures he sent and where he was for those last conversations, I ask Preeda to express my gratitude for the care he received, and we leave.

It is quiet in the car as we head to the temple, each of us lost in our own thoughts. Paul, who has only known Jeff for a short while, has been thrust into a situation that is emotionally weighing on his wife. Preeda, who has known him for at least 15 years, has lost a friend and long-time client, and I am feeling sadness combined with a shadow of regret over our lost connection.

When we arrive at the temple, Paul and I wait by the car, while Preeda goes inside. About 20 minutes later, she returns. The cremation will be in four days at the cremation pavilion on the temple grounds. The 'burning man', who is not a monk, will be there that morning. The donation required is 15,000 Baht and includes a brief ceremony and use of the facility. There are also two additional costs: 6,500 Baht for the 'Burning Man', and 2,000 Baht for the casket. For a total of

23,500 Baht (at the current exchange rate, this equals approx. \$1,000.00 Canadian). I can retrieve the ashes the following day. Jeff had requested that his ashes be scattered at the beach near the condo he was living in.

According to the 'Thailand Family Law' website, www.thailandfamilylaw.com: In Thailand, cremation and scattering of ashes are deeply rooted in Buddhist traditions, to release the soul back to nature. Cremated ashes can generally be spread at beaches as it is considered a culturally acceptable practice, with the understanding that you should always be respectful of local customs and choose a discreet location away from crowds.

By this point, I am emotionally and physically drained and want to lie down, but Preeda knows we need to eat and that I will need some groceries. She suggests we head to Central Plaza in downtown Pattaya.

She is right: Central Plaza is a modern, glitzy shopping center with three levels, including a large food court offering a variety of delicious dishes. Cash cards are purchased at a central kiosk, and then we wander about, choosing from the numerous food vendors. It's perfect; we each have an assortment of different things and proceed to the seating area to enjoy. A much-needed uplifting ending to a stressful day.

I also learn my first Thai word.... 'pèt' for spicy, and quickly after that, my first essential Thai phrase.... 'pèt nôi' for just a tiny bit of spiciness. The grocery store is fabulous, with fruits, pastries, and prepared meals, which will be a good option for

me at this point. I pick up enough items to get through a few days, along with water and a bottle of wine.

Back in the car, we are finally headed to Sunset Heights, the complex where Jeff was renting a condo, and where I will be staying. It is on Baan Amphur Beach at the south end of Pattaya. Jeff had told me that it is really nice, 3 bedrooms, 3 bathrooms and 3 balconies, two looking out over the Gulf of Thailand and one over the hillside to the east. The complex has a pool and direct beach access.

On the way, I ask Preeda to explain the 'wai' to me. I was aware of this Thai greeting, but wasn't sure of the nuances associated with it.

She explains that the 'wai' is pronounced like the word 'why', and is the traditional greeting of Thailand. It is usually accompanied by the word 'sawasdee', which is 'hello'. It is also a way to show respect and is used by Thai people to express gratitude, apologize, or bid farewell. Thais often use the 'wai' when passing temples, shrines or anything related to the monarchy. Buddhist monks are always greeted with a 'wai', but they are not expected to return it. And you do not 'wai' anyone younger than you; instead, smile and nod. I guess for me it will be 'just smile and nod'!

"Should foreigners do this?" I ask.

"It's probably not a good idea for them to initiate a 'wai' greeting, but they are expected to return it," she replies.

Preeda goes on to explain how to give a 'wai' greeting and the three types of 'wai'. The Thai 'wai' is made by putting your palms together at chest level, with each finger touching its counterpart. You then slightly bow your head so your index fingers touch your nose. Women often bend their knees like a bow, whereas men bow their heads.

It gets more complicated, as there are three different ways to 'wai'! The first way, which she has just described, is a relaxed greeting usually used with friends, family and peers. The second is when the thumbs touch the tip of your nose, and the index fingers reach the forehead. This is a more formal 'wai', and the third and most respectful 'wai' is to lower your head until your thumbs are between your eyebrows and your palms are still on your chest, and you should also slightly bow. This third 'wai' is used for royalty, monks and other highly respected individuals.

The whole time she is explaining this, I am in the backseat trying to do the three types...ok, so I can do the casual and maybe the formal, but that last one, there is no way my neck can bend that far. Probably good that I am older than almost everyone here, and can just 'smile and nod'!

It is dark, almost 8 pm, when we turn down a long tree-lined laneway leading to the condo complex. The laneway and parking area are softly lit, and Paul points out Jeff's truck, parked off to one side, as we pull up to the covered but open entrance. Paul unloads my suitcase, and I take the groceries

and my backpack from the back seat. We walk through the entrance and across the white marble floors.

This building was built in 1999, and it has 88 units spread over 22 stories. The lobby area is spacious, with windows and sliding glass doors that look out over the pool and patio area, with the Gulf of Thailand as a backdrop. I see an exercise room with stationary bikes, weights, and other equipment to my right, and a games room to the left, complete with ping-pong and card tables.

There is also a large seating area in the lobby and a reception area where we stop. Preeda informs a gentleman at the desk about who I am and that I will be staying in Jeff's condo for a while. Two gentlemen are standing there, one who appears to be a security guard. They politely acknowledge me with a 'wai'. The gentleman at the desk gives Preeda some mail, and we proceed to the elevators.

The condo is on the 18th floor, an end unit. There are 4 units on this floor. When we reach the door, Preeda has the key in hand and opens it. Although no one has stayed here for over 6 weeks and the air conditioners have not been on, the temperature inside is comfortable. Preeda turns on the nearest light switch, which illuminates a wide entrance area. I can see that beyond this wider entrance area is a long hallway that leads to an open living area at the far end. On my right by the front door are 3 filing cabinets, and further up two closed doors off that side of the hallway. To the left, a few feet from the door, is a small kitchen, and further up a bathroom.

In the open living area, there is a glass patio table with four chairs, at one end, and a sitting area with a television at the other end. The furnishings are minimal, mismatched, and well-worn but functional. There are also an outdoor lounge and a stationary bike set up in this area. Sliding glass doors at each end open onto balconies, and I notice another closed door off the dining area.

Several shopping bags are sitting on the floor. Paul explains that these contain Jeff's belongings that they had retrieved from his hospital room. Paul leaves my suitcase by the bike, and I put the groceries on the table and drop my backpack on a chair. I can tell that they are tired and anxious to get home; it has been a long day for them as well. Preeda is holding a couple of large brown envelopes and a small plastic bag in her hand and places them on the table.

"These are the documents and other items from Jeff's safe. Here are his phone and the keys to the condo, the truck, and the house. There is data on his phone, and I can show you how to add more. I will get the documents that Liz sent translated into Thai and come by in a couple of days. We should have the death certificate by then. Call if you need anything."

I'm too tired to deal with anything else. I thank them both for everything and say goodnight.

First things first, I pick up the grocery bag and head to the kitchen to pour a glass of wine. Finding the light switch, I flip it on... there's a loud bang, and glass is flying everywhere!

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I hope you have enjoyed this preview. I would appreciate your comments or feedback.

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Thank you.