

## Chapter 1 *Dawn in Bangkok*

Hu decided to get up. She couldn't sleep. The first bird of the Bangkok dawn, the cuckoo, started its noisy, morning cry, 'Gow-wow! Gow-wow! Get up! Get up!' Hu could hear the growing noise of the early morning traffic. It was not yet six o'clock.

It was impossible to sleep. She walked over to her window and opened it. The noise and the smell of the big city washed over her. It was still dark. It was a cool January morning, the first day of the spring term.

Hu looked out of the window. The newspaper man arrived on his motorbike and gave his parcel of newspapers to the man at the entrance of the apartment block. The two men laughed, and then the newspaper man waved and drove noisily away to the next apartment block in the Soi, the next street. There was light in the sky now, a soft orange light in the grey dawn.

It was always difficult to sleep the night before the new term, but this time it was even harder. Hu was excited. She would see Marwa and Thomas and Yoshiko again, and that was exciting. She would do less housework and more school work, and that was exciting too.

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Hu was seventeen and a good student. She studied at the Bangkok International Academy, an international school for

the children of foreign people working in Thailand. It was expensive, but the Chinese oil company, where her father worked, helped her family to pay for her education. She had to study very hard, and all the classes – except her Thai language class – were in English. Hu loved English. Her father wanted her to become a doctor. Her mother said she didn't mind what Hu wanted as long as Hu was happy. But Hu wasn't sure if she wanted to be a doctor, or that she would get good enough results to go to medical school.

Hu liked to work hard, but she was worried about her studies, about her English exam. Today Mr Stanyer, her English teacher, would give out the results of last term's English test. Hu knew she had problems with her English, but she didn't know what the problems were. She loved English – or she *had* loved English until she started with Mr Stanyer last term – and she thought she was good at English. Her classmates thought she was good at English too. She helped Marwa with her English homework sometimes, but then Marwa got better results than Hu. Better results with *her* work!

Hu didn't understand. Mr Stanyer seemed to like her, he always smiled at her. But at the end of last term, after the test, he had asked her to stay after class.

'Come here and sit down,' Mr Stanyer said. Hu sat at his desk in the empty classroom, facing her teacher.

'How was the test, Hu Jian Ming?' asked Mr Stanyer.

'OK, Mr Stanyer. I think I did quite well,' said Hu.

'I hope so. Your father has great hopes for you. He works for an oil company, doesn't he?' Mr Stanyer smiled and looked Hu in the eye.

'He's an engineer with a Chinese oil company.' Hu felt

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uncomfortable.

‘He wants you to take the International Baccalaureate, the IB, doesn’t he?’ Mr Stanyer continued with questions.

‘Well, you must get better results next term. This is just a test, but next term we have the real exam. Then we decide if you can start the IB programme,’ said Mr Stanyer.

‘Yes, Mr Stanyer.’ She noticed Mr Stanyer was sweating, although the classroom was cool.

Mr Stanyer smiled and put his hands on his bald head. ‘Perhaps you should do some extra work on your English. Think about it over the holiday.’

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‘Oh!’ said Hu. Her cat, Lao Mao, had jumped suddenly into her room through the open window, surprising her. ‘Stupid cat!’ said Hu as she picked up Lao Mao. Hu loved animals, she loved nature. Her home city, Wu Xi, was in beautiful countryside, with lakes and low hills in the distance. When Hu’s family had to leave China and come to Thailand so that Hu’s father could work for his oil company in Bangkok, her mother and father allowed her to bring one thing to remind her of home. Hu chose to bring Lao Mao. Hu liked to talk to him when she was sad, or worried, or feeling a long way from home. Very quietly, she explained her problems with her results for her English studies to the cat.

‘If I fail my English test, what can I do?’ whispered Hu. Lao Mao said nothing. The noisy cuckoo sang back across the waking city: ‘*Gow-wow! Gow-wow!*’

Hu looked over the apartment blocks to the raised motorway carrying traffic over the city, and the private

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gardens of the few remaining houses. Bangkok. She missed her own country very much. The sun was rising over the block opposite hers like a big, wet, orange ball. A man in yellow clothes, a Buddhist monk, was walking up the road asking for food. A big Mercedes car came round to the front gate. 'Probably a businessman going to the airport,' thought Hu.

Hu yawned. What would she do?

Something caught her eye in the Soi below. A very large orange and black animal, a squirrel, was running along an electricity line over the Soi. Electricity lines ran across the Soi in a hundred different directions, meeting at the posts at the sides of the street in big balls. Hu thought these balls of electricity lines looked like spaghetti. The squirrels used the electricity lines like motorways, running to and from whatever important business squirrels have to do. Hu looked towards the raised motorway in the distance. All the cars were stopped even now, at half past six in the morning. Another Bangkok traffic jam. Hu's eyes followed the racing squirrel along the line and down into another garden.

There was a knock at the door.

'Jian Ming! Come on, my love. It's a school day today.'

That was her father. He was usually out of bed first. He worked very hard.

'I'm out of bed, father. I'm coming. Don't worry.'

'Don't worry,' thought Hu. 'My father mustn't worry,' she told Lao Mao, her cat. 'He works too hard.'

Lao Mao said nothing. He didn't care.