

A Wife in Bangkok

A Novel



Iris Mitlin Lav



She Writes Press

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For my husband, Michael Lav

Chapter 1

“You’re moving to where?” asked Amber, as they walked out of the grocery store together.

“Bangkok,” repeated Crystal. “You know, the capital of Thailand, in Asia.”

“That’s the end of the world! Are all of you going?”

“Yes, the whole family. Brian is going ahead soon, and then I’ll go over with Tim and Lisa in June.”

“I don’t believe it. I don’t think anyone from Pico City has ever moved to Thailand. How will you live? What will you do? Are you just going to leave your job here? How will the kids go to school? Isn’t there a war going on over there? What will I do without being able to talk to you?”

“Look, it’s five thirty. I’ve got to run to pick up Lisa from her softball practice. I promise I’ll tell you all about it before I leave and write to you regularly while I’m gone. Just to say now . . . the Vietnam War is about to end. And I think Firstgas will help us get set up. I’m pretty excited, but also a bit apprehensive. It certainly is a long way away—and from the little I know about it, it seems very, very different.”

Crystal waved good-bye to Amber and ran into the parking lot. Her friend Mary spotted her and shouted, “Hey, Crystal, how’s the job?”

Not wanting to be delayed, Crystal shouted back, "Love it!" and hurried to drive off.

That evening, Brian cooked hamburgers on the grill. After they ate, the family sat in the living room to talk about Bangkok. Brian began, "My boss told me today that I have to leave for Bangkok very soon, by the beginning of May. That's pretty sudden, I know, but I'm sure you can all manage with that."

Tim and Lisa both stared wide-eyed at their father. Then Lisa piped up, "Wait! We can't leave in the middle of the semester!"

"Your father and I agreed that he'd go ahead, and we'd stay in Pico City until school finishes in June," Crystal said. She kept her tone even, but she was roiling inside. Brian had come home yesterday and told her that the company needed him in Thailand immediately. He was just going to walk out with his suitcases. All the household packing, all the arrangements about what to take and what to leave, what to do with the house and cars, all the shopping for things they would need to take to Bangkok, she suspected that all that would fall to her to accomplish. At this point, she couldn't even imagine what that would entail. But it did occur to her that Brian had never asked her if she would be willing to go, or if she would be willing to take up the responsibility for making the arrangements for the move. He had just assumed that she would be a good wife, following her husband and doing what was necessary. And she was going along with it, she thought, so she guessed she was.

Lisa, who was ten and beginning to look a lot like Crystal, was full of questions. "What do they speak in Thailand? Will we have to go to school in another language?"

Tim, two years younger, chimed in, "Can I bring my books and toys? What about my train set? Will we have a TV there? Will I be able to watch *The Jetsons*?"

Brian sighed. "They speak the Thai language in Thailand. I'm told it's pretty difficult to learn. But there is an American school there—and Firstgas will pay the tuition. So, you guys will

be going to school in English. Shouldn't be a problem. And Tim, I don't know the answer to your questions. I think the electricity works differently there. And I have no idea if they have TV or not. I guess we'll find out when we get there."

Still puzzled about what their life would be like in Thailand, Lisa and Tim went upstairs to do their homework.

Crystal told Brian that she was planning to tell her boss about the move tomorrow, before he heard rumors. "I hope you understand that giving up the job I love is going to be very hard. You know how important it is to me." Crystal's voice cracked, and she paused to gain control. Then she asked, "Do you know if spouses of employees of foreign companies are allowed to work there? Do you think there will be opportunities for me? I don't see how I can work in radio if I can't speak the language. But radio is what I know. Do you think there is an English-language radio station?"

Brian said, "So many questions! We'll just have to wait and see."

Thanks a bunch for the comforting words, Brian, she thought, but she said nothing.



Crystal got up early the next morning. She showered, washed her hair, and carefully styled it. Looking in a mirror at her shoulder-length blond hair, she thought, *That's pretty good.* She put on a black empire-waist dress that made her five-foot, six-inch body look even taller than it was. She needed that extra bit of confidence that morning.

At eight thirty, Crystal pushed open the door to the squat white building that housed WOKP radio. She paused at the door to her office and looked wistfully at the "Assistant News Director" engraved under Crystal Carrol. She put down her briefcase and purse and went looking for her boss.

Crystal blurted out the news as fast as she could. "Hello, Joe. I don't know how to tell you this after you have been so kind to encourage me to major in journalism in college, to teach me the

ropes here, and to let me work flexible hours so I can keep up with my kids. Not many bosses would do that, and I am grateful. And I love my job. But I have to tell you. I am moving with my family to Bangkok, Thailand, in June. There, I've said it." She gulped a deep breath.

Joe stared at her, running his hands through his hair several times. He took out his pack of cigarettes, offered one to Crystal, and lit hers and then his own. Having gained that bit of time to recover, he said, "Bangkok? You're kidding! Isn't it dangerous there?"

"I really don't know, but I guess I'll find out. I don't think Brian's company would send us somewhere dangerous. There's a lot I have to find out before we go. My biggest question is, what will I do there? The past seven years, I've gotten so used to juggling this sometimes-intense job with raising the children, taking care of the house, and taking care of myself. I wonder if it's all going to come to a full stop. And I don't know what might be next."

"You're very talented," Joe said. "I'm sure you will find something good to do."

"Thanks! Those words mean a lot to me."

"In the meantime, we have to find someone to do your job. I'd like there to be an overlap so you can train the new person."

"Of course."

That evening, after the children had gone to bed, Crystal began another conversation with her husband. "Brian, I need to understand more of what I'm getting into. What do you know about the person you'll be replacing? Did he have a wife and family? And why did he leave Bangkok so suddenly that you have to go out there right away and can't even wait until June?"

Brian promised to look into the matter, and came home the next evening with the telephone number of his predecessor in Bangkok, whose wife's name was Jan. But no one had been willing to tell him why they had come home before their time was up.

The next day around one o'clock, Crystal closed the door to her office, took out a fresh yellow pad, lit a cigarette, and dialed

the Texas number Brian had given her. She heard the phone ring five times before it was picked up.

“Hello, is this Jan?”

“Yes,” was the wary answer. “Who’s calling?”

“My name is Crystal Carrol, and my husband, Brian, will be going out to Bangkok for Firstgas. I’m planning to go out in June with our children to join him. We were told to expect to stay there for a few years. I have no idea what I’m getting into, so I’m hoping that I can get some information and advice from you, Jan.”

“I guess so. Where do you want me to start?”

“How do people live there? What is it like?”

“Most expats live in rented houses in the area called Sukhumvit. Sukhumvit is a long street with a lot of smaller lanes called *sois* that branch off it. The *sois* along Sukhumvit are numbered. The ones closer to the center of the city have lower numbers. The houses are on the *sois*.”

“So how do we find a house to rent? What’s the most important thing to look for in a house?”

“There are real estate rental agents, just like here. The administrator at the company can probably recommend someone. I think the one we used no longer is in business.

“The most important thing to look for,” Jan continued, “is security. Is the wall around the compound high and secure? Next is comfort. Are there air conditioners in all the rooms or a ready place to put them, with electrical outlets? Does the water pump work well? Does—”

“Excuse me. Could we go back to security? Could you tell me a little more about that?”

“Oh, sure. Most houses have second-floor balconies, sometimes a balcony off each bedroom. When you rent a house, make sure there are no trees or large tree limbs up against the balconies. And put new, good locks on the balcony doors.”

How worried should I be? Crystal wondered. Aloud, she asked, “Is security a big concern there?”

Jan answered, "It's just a precaution."

Crystal thought, *I doubt Jan is giving me the straight story. There must be some underlying reason she's saying that.* She asked, "A precaution against what, if you don't mind explaining?"

"It's just better to be safe. You know, like you lock your door here."

Crystal obviously wasn't going to get any more out of Jan on that topic, so she said, "Okay. Please continue about the living arrangements if you have time now. If not, we could arrange another time."

"Now is okay." Jan continued, speaking rapid fire. "Once you have a house, you'll need servants to run it. Usually you get a head servant who shops for food and cooks and does something else such as look after the children or clean the first floor of the house. Depending on the age of your children, you may want a maid whose sole job is to look after them. Bangkok can be a dangerous place for children to play unsupervised—lots of water, lots of insects and snakes. Moving right along, you also will need a servant to do the laundry. There's no such thing as a washing machine in Thailand—laundry is done by hand. In the heat, most people change clothes a number of times in a day. A maid does the laundry every day, including the sheets, in plastic tubs set on the floor. If you have a garden area around your house, you will need a gardener. Finally, assuming you are planning on buying a car to use there, you may want a driver. Traffic jams are common and it's hard to find parking. I think the company may be in the process of changing its policy on cars, so they may provide you with a car and driver. I'm not sure."

"Whew, that's a lot of information," Crystal said, feeling the beginnings of a headache with thoughts swirling in her brain. *Servants! I can't imagine me having a houseful of servants,* she thought. *Not sure I feel great about that!* Aloud she said, "I don't know anything about hiring Thai servants. Do they speak English? How would I go about setting up a household like that?"

“There’s an American women’s organization that runs a servant exchange, employment service, or whatever you want to call it. It’s on the grounds of the US Embassy. They suggest that at least your head servant should speak English.” Jan paused. Crystal wondered if she was going to continue. Then Jan said, with a quiet, choked-up voice, “Look, I’ve got to go now. I wish you luck.”

“I really appreciate it,” Crystal said, wondering about the teary sound of the *wish you luck*. “Thank you so much.”

Crystal thought, *I have so many more questions. But that certainly was a final sign-off from Jan.*



That evening she told Brian about the conversation with Jan and asked him if he knew why she was talking about balconies, trees, and doors. “Not specifically,” said Brian, “but I know that the family left in a hurry. That’s why I have to leave in two weeks. Maybe they had a break-in or something like that. I’ll try to find out, but as I mentioned, no one is really talking about it. John is on some kind of extended leave from the company. He’ll be back at work next month. But I’ll be gone by then.”

“Not very comforting,” mumbled Crystal. “What are we getting into?”

“There are a lot of expatriates living in Bangkok. It has a reputation as a very good place to live. Maybe John and Jan were just unlucky.”

There is that word again, “luck,” thought Crystal. *Do we have enough of that?*

“Brian, I have so many unanswered questions. For example, I don’t know what we should bring and what we shouldn’t. And I’m sure Jan is finished talking to me. Any thoughts?”

“Crystal, I don’t know any more than you do. And I’m a bit overwhelmed having to learn everything about the company’s Thai

business in just a couple of weeks. You're a reporter, right? Can't you use your skills to figure this out?"

"Oh sure, it's exactly like interviewing Jeb at the hardware store about his missing inventory. No problem at all. I guess I don't need any help from you."

"I know you're upset about the move," Brian continued—ignoring Crystal's sarcasm. "But remember, it's an amazing opportunity for my career. An oil field with commercial potential was discovered offshore in the Gulf of Thailand in 1973, just two years ago. While Firstgas can't compete with the giants like Exxon and Chevron that are operating in Thailand, we have some opportunities to get a significant piece of the pie. And they're making me the manager of the entire operation in the country. That's quite a responsibility and a big vote of confidence for someone my age, isn't it?"

Crystal dutifully said, "Sure," and started up the stairs. "I'm going to make sure Lisa and Tim are doing their homework," she said over her shoulder.

Instead, feeling the start of tears, she went into her room and closed the door. How had her life gotten to this point, where she felt she had to follow her husband someplace she didn't want to go? Perhaps it had been preordained. After all, she had met Brian right after college, when she'd returned to live in Pico City. She'd felt very insecure about her life back then. She remembered how difficult it was to make new friends at the university, and how withdrawn and alone she had felt. Since she had come back to Pico City, she'd resumed living with her older sister, Jean, and her husband and family. They had taken her in when their parents had died suddenly in a car crash one night when Crystal was sixteen. She was grateful to Jean, but she had always felt like a bit of an unwelcome guest, an intruder into their family. Then Brian showed up at her church one day. She had noticed him as he walked into the service, because he was so much taller than almost anyone else, but he sat down a few pews behind her and she didn't pay any more

attention to him. But he must have been watching her, because he was waiting near the path to the parking lot when she came out.

He said, "Excuse me. My name is Brian Carrol and I'm new in town. I'm an engineer with Firstgas. I noticed that you've greeted many of the people here and seem comfortable in this church. And I admit I asked the pastor about you as I walked out, and he told me that you're single. I am as well. Could I take you to lunch now so you could tell me about the church and help me learn about the town?"

Crystal thought, *Wow! He seems interested in me. He asked the pastor about me. A handsome guy with a good job. Could he be what I've been hoping for?*

"My sister is expecting me for lunch," Crystal replied. "But I would be happy to help you. Perhaps another time?"

"How about dinner tonight?"

Crystal agreed. Over dinner, they told each other about their lives, and Crystal told Brian about Pico City. Toward the end of the dinner, Brian took her hand and said, "You're a remarkable woman. You have had to overcome so much, but you seem so bright and organized. I hope we can continue to see each other."

Crystal squeezed his hand and said, "I hope so too."

Crystal began to see Brian frequently—and because she was so eager to find a way to move out of Jean's house, she married him after knowing him fewer than six months. Up until now, she had felt fine letting him make most of the decisions for the family. She had her work, a few old friends with whom she felt comfortable, and her children. She didn't mind ceding control over the finances, purchasing decisions, and the like. But this decision, to move the family across the world, was in a different category. Nevertheless, Brian had assumed he could make it himself. Brian was so used to calling the shots that Crystal was certain he would ignore any objections she might raise.

The next morning, she sat in her office smoking a cigarette and thinking about the problem. *This is the situation I'm in now, so how can I find someone to help me out?*

On her lunch break she went to the Pico City library. She knew the librarian well; Barbara had often helped her out with background for her news stories.

“Barbara, I have a big problem. The family needs to move to Bangkok, Thailand. Soon. And I have lots of questions about what to bring or not to bring, what life will be like there, that sort of thing. Do you have any ideas for resources?”

“There might be some travel guides that tell you a bit, although they certainly aren’t written for people who are going to stay a long time. I don’t think we have any for Thailand, but you might ask the bookstore to order one for you.” And after some thought, Barbara added, “You know, I think the State Department puts out some guidance for its employees about living in various countries. You could call or write them.”

“What a good idea. Do you have any guide to federal offices, or a Washington, DC, phone book? I’d like to call them. Maybe they could give me the name of a family who was at the embassy and has recently returned.”

“I do have a guide to federal offices. It just has a general number for the State Department, but at least it would be a place to start. Here it is. I’ve heard that they call the sections that work on different countries ‘desks,’ so you might try asking for the Thailand desk.”

“Thanks. I’ll try calling this afternoon.”

Back at her office, Crystal dialed the number Barbara had given her. An operator sounding somewhere between bored and harried answered the phone.

“Hello,” Crystal said. “Could you please connect me to the desk that works on Thailand?”

After much clicking on the phone, a man answered. “May I help you?”

Crystal explained her situation, and finally, after being transferred three times, she was sent to the political department.

“Hello. This is Mrs. Mayberry. May I help you?”

"I hope so. My husband works for Firstgas, and we are about to be posted to Thailand. I'm hoping to get some information about the country, and perhaps contact information for someone who has lived there recently. Could you help me with that?"

"Let me think. Oh yes. The Darvins—Peter and Judy—came back from a posting in the Embassy's political section a couple of months ago. What kind of questions do you have?"

"I mostly want to know what we should or should not bring, what life will be like there, what opportunities there may be for me to find work, and things like that."

"If you give me your name and phone number, I'll contact Judy and ask her if she'd be willing to call you."

"Sure, my name is Crystal Carrol. I really appreciate your help, Mrs. Mayberry." Crystal gave her home and work phone numbers, and then continued, "Would you happen to have a written summary of the current political situation in Thailand?" Crystal imagined that Firstgas would at some point be briefing Brian on the situation, but given the way he had been dismissing her questions, and his unhelpful suggestion that she use her reporter skills to figure things out for herself, she hoped that Mrs. Mayberry could give her some information.

"I'm afraid we don't have anything public. But I could give you the three-minute version over the phone. After decades of military rule, a successful election for parliament and prime minister was held in January of this year. The current prime minister, Kukrit Pramoj, took office in March—just last month. He is well liked by the intelligentsia and liberals in Bangkok, and he is planning some steps to bind the rural population to him. A lot of well-educated Thais who were living in other countries are going back to take up positions in the government. It remains to be seen how well Khun Kukrit will do. He probably will have the military breathing down his neck, anxious to regain power. But the US is very happy with the turn toward democracy. You also should know that Thailand is a kingdom and the King

of Thailand is revered as a god. You will have to be very careful never to say anything about the king that can be construed as negative. The *lèse majesté* laws are very strong there, and people who criticize the king usually land in prison. That's about all I can tell you right now."

"Thank you, that's so helpful," said Crystal. "I really appreciate the information and your willingness to contact Judy Darvin."

"You're welcome. Good luck to you."

There it is again, "luck," thought Crystal, putting down the phone. *I certainly hope Judy Darvin calls me. In the meantime, let me see what I can learn.*

The next day at lunchtime, Crystal went back to the library to look up more information on the political situation.

The Pico City library did receive the *New York Times*—about three days late—but only kept two months' worth of the paper. Anyone who wanted to research further back had to go to Tulsa or Oklahoma City and use the microfilm archives. She didn't have time for that right now. But going through the copies that were in the library, she realized how little attention she had been paying to world affairs. Even at her radio station, they only subscribed to national news from AP and UPI.

She knew that the Vietnam War was nearly over, but she didn't know any details. Reading the articles, she found that the few remaining United States' troops were planning on leaving Vietnam in mid-April. But how did Thailand fit into that war? She knew the country was occasionally mentioned in connection with the war but couldn't remember what the connection was. Until Brian sprang his news, it really hadn't mattered to her. One of the articles mentioned that US troops would continue to be stationed in Thailand. Was Thailand one of the countries that the communists were trying to take over? Mrs. Mayberry at the State Department said that Thailand just recently had a democratic election. But just how safe a place was Thailand to bring a family? *Is it unsafe? Is that why everyone is wishing me "luck"?*

Back at her office, she stared at her calendar and picked up a red pen. She circled April 1, the day Brian told her they were moving. Didn't ask her, just told her it was necessary. Then she circled May 1, the day Brian was leaving. Finally, she circled June 27, the day she and the children would leave for Thailand. Finally she put a heavy black circle around 1975, knowing it was a year she never would forget, for better or for worse.

That evening, Brian asked her to write down everything she would need to do before she and the children left in June. He said that because he had to leave so soon and had so much to do at work before he left, she would have to make most of the arrangements.

Brian began to rattle off the list of tasks. Talking to a real estate agent about the possibility of renting their house to someone and, if that was not possible, finding someone to take care of the house fairly inexpensively. Deciding what they would take on the plane with them, what they would have shipped by sea, and what they would leave here in storage. Finding out about anything special they should buy and bring. Buying appropriate clothes for herself and the children. Getting the children's school and health records to bring along. Getting all the immunizations required to enter Thailand for herself and the children. There was still smallpox in Thailand, so the children would have to be vaccinated even though it no longer was needed in the US. The list just kept growing and growing.

Crystal was near tears again.

"Maybe the children and I should just stay here in Pico City, and you could come back once a year to visit us. I don't see why we have to go to Thailand just because you've decided that you're going to work there."

"Crystal!"

"What?"

"Many people love living in Thailand. It is a beautiful country, and they say the people there are very nice. With my salary and all the special allowances, you won't have to work. And you won't have to do housework or cook. What's not to like?"

“I thought you understood that I love working at my job. What are you talking about? Are you talking about me, Crystal, your wife? Or some imaginary wife? Besides, I have a bad feeling about this move. People I’ve talked to keep wishing us ‘luck’ in the most ominous way.”

Brian approached Crystal and put his arms around her. “I promise you that it will be a good adventure. It just will take some work to get ready for it.”

Crystal shrugged her shoulders. “If you say so.”

