

A
Wish
in the
Dark



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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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A JUNIOR LIBRARY GUILD SELECTION

For my mother and father



Chapter 1

A monster of a mango tree grew in the courtyard of Namwon Prison. Its fluffy green branches stretched across the cracked cement and hung over the soupy brown water of the Chattana River. The women inmates spent most of their days sheltered under the shade of this tree while the boats glided up and down and up again on the other side of the prison gate.

The dozen children who lived in Namwon also spent most of their days lying in the shade. But not in mango season. In mango season, the tree dangled golden drops of heaven overhead, swaying just out of reach.

It drove the kids nuts.

They shouted at the mangoes. They chucked pieces of broken cement at them, trying to knock them down. And when the mangoes refused to fall, the children cried, stomped their bare feet, and collapsed in frustration on the ground.

Pong never joined them. Instead, he sat against the tree's trunk, hands crossed behind his head. He looked like he was sleeping, but actually, he was paying attention.

Pong had been paying attention to the tree for weeks. He knew which mangoes had started ripening first. He noticed when the fruit lightened from lizard-skin green to pumpkin-rind yellow. He watched the ants crawl across the mangoes, and he knew where they paused to sniff the sugar inside.

Pong looked at his friend, Somkit, and gave him a short nod. Somkit wasn't shouting at the mangoes, either. He was sitting under the branch that Pong had told him to sit under, waiting. Somkit had been waiting an hour, and he'd wait for hours more if he had to, because the most important thing to wait for in Namwon were the mangoes.

He and Pong were both nine years old, both orphans. Somkit was a head shorter than Pong, and skinny—even for a prisoner. He had a wide, round face, and the other kids teased him that he looked like those grilled rice balls on sticks that old ladies sold from their boats.

Like many of the women at Namwon, their mothers had been sent there because they'd been caught stealing. Both their mothers had died in childbirth, though from the stories the other women still told, Somkit's birth

had been more memorable and involved feet showing up where a head was supposed to be.

Pong wagged his finger at his friend to get him to scoot to the left.

A little more.

A little more.

There.

Finally, after all that waiting, Pong heard the soft pop of a mango stem. He gasped and smiled as the first mango of the season dropped straight into Somkit's waiting arms.

But before Pong could join his friend and share their triumph, two older girls noticed what Somkit held in his hands.

"Hey, did you see that?" said one of the girls, propping herself up on her knobby elbows.

"Sure did," said the other, cracking scab-covered knuckles. "Hey, Skin-and-Bones," she called to Somkit. "What do you got for me today?"

"Uh-oh," said Somkit, cradling the mango in one hand and bracing himself to stand up with the other.

He was useless in a fight, which meant that everyone liked fighting him the most. And he couldn't run more than a few steps without coughing, which meant the fights usually ended badly.

Pong turned toward the guards who were leaning against the wall behind him, looking almost as bored with life in Namwon as the prisoners were.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” said Pong, bowing to the first guard.

She sucked on her teeth and slowly lifted one eyebrow.

“Ma’am, it’s those girls,” said Pong. “I think they’re going to take —”

“And what do you want me to do about it?” she snapped. “You kids need to learn to take care of yourselves.”

The other guard snorted. “Might be good for you to get kicked around a little. Toughen you up.”

A hot, angry feeling fluttered inside Pong’s chest. Of course the guards wouldn’t help. When did they ever? He looked at the women prisoners. They stared back at him with flat, resigned eyes. They were far past caring about one miserable mango.

Pong turned away from them and hurried back to his friend. The girls approached Somkit slowly, savoring the coming brawl. “Quick, climb on,” he said, dropping to one knee.

“What?” said Somkit.

“Just get on!”

“Oh, man, I know how this is gonna turn out,” grumbled Somkit as he climbed onto Pong’s back, still clutching the mango.

Pong knew, too, but it couldn’t be helped. Because while Pong was better than anyone at paying attention, and almost as good as Somkit at waiting, he was terrible at ignoring when things weren’t fair.

And the most important thing to do in Namwon was to forget about life being fair.

“Where do you think *you’re* going?” asked the knobby-elbowed girl as she strode toward them.

“We caught this mango, fair and square,” said Pong, backing himself and Somkit away.

“You sure did,” said her scab-knuckled friend. “And if you hand it over right now, we’ll only punch you once each. Fair and square.”

“Just do it,” whispered Somkit. “It’s not worth —”

“You don’t deserve it just because you want it,” said Pong firmly. “And you’re not taking it from us.”

“Is that right?” said the girls.

“Oh, man.” Somkit sighed. “Here we go!”

The girls shrieked and Pong took off. They chased him as he galloped around and around the courtyard with Somkit clinging onto his back like a baby monkey.

“You can never just let things go!” Somkit shouted.

“We can’t . . . let them have it!” panted Pong. “It’s ours!” He dodged around clumps of smaller children, who watched gleefully, relieved not to be the ones about to get the life pummeled out of them.

“So what? A mango isn’t worth getting beat up over.” Somkit looked over his shoulder. “Go faster, man — they’re going to catch us!”

The guards leaning against the wall laughed as they watched the chase. “Go on, girls. Get ‘em!” said one.

“Not yet, though,” said the other guard. “This is the best entertainment we’ve had all week!”

“I’m . . . getting . . . tired.” Pong huffed. “You better . . . eat that thing before I collapse!”

Warm mango juice dripped down the back of Pong’s neck as Somkit tore into the fruit with his teeth. “Oh, man. I was wrong. This *is* worth getting beat up over.” Somkit reached over his friend’s shoulder and stuck a plug of mango into the corner of Pong’s mouth.

It was ripe and sweet, not stringy yet. Paradise.



Chapter 2

Later, as they lay on their backs next to the river gate, Pong tried to remind Somkit how great that mango had been. The sun had started to set, and their golden-brown cheekbones and shins were turning the same purple color as the sky.

Somkit touched his bruised cheek and winced. “Why do I have to be friends with such a loudmouth?”

Pong grinned. “Because no one else will be friends with you.”

Somkit reached over and flicked him on the ear.

“Ow!” said Pong, scooting away. “You know, between the two of us, you’ve actually got the bigger mouth.”

“And you’ll notice that I keep it shut around the guards and mean kids,” said Somkit. “Sometimes you have to go along with things if you don’t want to get mashed into pulp. But you? You just never know when to shut up and let things go.”

“I know,” said Pong, folding one arm under his head. “But we earned that mango. It’s stupid that we even have to wait for them to fall. The guards should just let us climb the tree. It’s almost like they *want* us to have to fight over them.” He put two fingers on the bone in the center of his rib cage. “Stuff like that, I don’t know — it just makes me so mad. I get this burning feeling right here.”

“It’s probably gas,” said Somkit. “Look, next year those stupid girls will turn thirteen, and then they’ll be out of here. We’ll be the oldest ones, and we can eat our mangoes in peace.”

Children born at Namwon were released when their mother’s sentence was up or when they turned thirteen, whichever came first.

But Pong didn’t care about the girls’ release date. If anything, it was just one more bit of unfairness that those two would get out first. It would be four more years until Pong and Somkit turned thirteen. Four years. It felt like forever.

Pong turned his face from Somkit and looked past the bars of the river gate. Namwon sat a little upriver from Chattana City. From here, Pong could just see the lights starting to come on, one by one by one thousand,

until there were two cities: one on the shore, one in the water, both made of light.

Normally at this time of night, the two of them would take turns sharing their dreams about what sort of life they'd lead in the city after they got out: the food they'd eat, the boats they'd buy. Somkit would have at least three boats: one to live on, one to fish from, and one speedboat with a custom motor that would be good for nothing except driving ridiculously fast. Pong liked to picture himself as a grown man with a good job and a full belly, lounging in the back of that slick speedboat, with Somkit at the wheel.

A single orb of glass swung from the mango tree overhead. Its dim Violet glow couldn't compete with the bright blaze across the river. Compared to the city, Namwon was like a cave. Was it any wonder that life wasn't fair for them? How could fairness find its way to them through all that darkness? But once they got out, under those lights, life would be different. They would eat mangoes they didn't have to fight for. When they asked for help, people would listen.

Somkit turned onto his side with a groan. "Ugh, every bone in my body hurts! You've got to promise me to lie low. At least until after next week."

“What’s next week?”

Somkit rolled his eyes and shook his head. “You’ll sit and listen to mangoes for hours, but you can’t even hear what people are saying when they’re standing right next to you! Didn’t you hear the cooks today? The Governor is coming here next week for an official visit.”

Pong sat up, ignoring the ache in his ribs. “The Governor!”

“I know,” said Somkit, licking his lips. “We’re actually going to get some decent food for once. The cooks said they’re going to grill a bunch of chickens.”

But Pong couldn’t think about food. He was thinking about the guest. Most people in Chattana looked up to the Governor. After what he’d done for their city, how could they not? The man was a hero. But to Pong, he was even more.

Pong had only ever seen a portrait of him in a textbook, but even from the picture, he could tell that the Governor was someone who would understand him. He would care about the unfairness at Namwon. If he knew how things were, he’d change them. That’s just the kind of person he was: someone who made things right.

Pong’s wild and secret wish, the one he didn’t tell even Somkit about because it sounded so silly, was that one day he’d work for Chattana’s great leader. He

imagined himself standing at the Governor's side as an assistant or an adviser, or whatever sort of jobs grown people had. Together, they would make everyone's life brighter.

The fact that the Governor was coming to Namwon for a visit couldn't be just a coincidence. It had to be a sign. It had to mean that one day Pong's wish would come true.

"Hey," said Somkit, snapping his fingers in front of Pong's face. "You've got that funny look of yours right now, and I don't like it. Listen, you've got to promise me that you're going to keep your mouth shut from now on. No more trouble, okay?" He leaned closer and bugged his eyes out. "Okay?"

Pong squinted at the city, making all the dots of light blur into one. "Okay," he said. "No more trouble."

At the time it seemed like a perfectly reasonable promise.



Chapter 3

Nok crossed her fingers behind her back as she watched her father clean his glasses for the hundredth time that morning. He was nervous — she could tell.

Warden Sivapan was supposed to be in charge of everything and everyone at Namwon, and Nok wished that just for today he could play the part.

“Nok . . .” whined her little sister Tip. “I am going to die in this thing!” Tip stuck her finger into the high, frilly collar of her blouse and pulled it away from her windpipe. It snapped back against her throat with a *thwack!*

Tip’s twin sister, Ploy, giggled.

“Stop fidgeting,” said Nok. She straightened Tip’s collar, then Ploy’s sash. “Aren’t you ashamed of yourselves, whining on a day like today?”

At least the twins got to wear short sleeves. Nok tugged at the cuffs of her itchy dress, fighting the urge to scratch her arms. She longed for the loose comfort of her

spire-fighting uniform. In her opinion, any clothes you couldn't throw a punch in were stupid. But of course she wouldn't complain, especially not today, the day of the Governor's visit.

Nok's mother glided toward them, an older version of the twins, in pale-blue silk. "All right," she said. "Everyone ready? Remember what I told you to say. No embarrassments today — got that, everyone?"

Nok's older brother smoothed down his hair. "That's fine for us," he whispered, "but who's going to tell Dad?"

Nok glared at him. Her mother snapped her fingers, and it was time to go. The twins followed Nok, who followed their brother, who had come home from university just for this occasion, who followed their mother, who was really the leader of the family, but who walked behind her husband to keep up appearances.

The family lined up near the river gate, in the shade of the big mango tree. The prisoners were supposed to be standing in orderly lines, too, but the children had run up to the gate to wait for the Governor's boat.

"I feel sorry for them," whispered Ploy, slipping her fingers into Nok's hand. "They have to live in a jail. Isn't that awful?"

"It's not a *jail*," said Nok. "It's a reform center."

Nok and her siblings hardly ever visited their father's workplace. That morning, Nok had made a point to show her sisters the official NAMWON WOMEN'S REFORM CENTER sign on the front gate, but the truth was that no one ever called it anything but a prison.

"Why can't Daddy just let them go?" asked Ploy.

Her twin leaned closer. "You know what Mama says: *Trees drop their fruit straight down.*"

"Huh? I'm not talking about fruit, dummy. I'm talking about kids!"

Nok sighed. "She means that you can't expect children to turn out very different from their parents. And these children have *criminals* for parents. It's best to keep a close eye on them. Besides, where else would they go? Some of them are orphans. They'd have to live on the street. At least here they get good food and they go to school. They're happy here."

The children did look happy, or at least excited. Nok noticed that only two of the boys weren't pressed up against the gate. One scrawny boy with a moon-round face stood on his tiptoes, unable to see over two girls who seemed to be blocking his view on purpose.

His friend, a boy with thick hair that stuck up at the top, also hung back, near the trunk of the mango tree. He wasn't looking at the gate at all, but up into the branches.

The boy tilted one ear up at a low-hanging fruit, almost as if he were listening to it.

How weird, thought Nok. *Who listens to mangoes?*

“Here he comes!” the other kids shouted.

“The Governor’s boat! I can see it!”

Nok’s mother snapped her fingers and hissed, “Places! To your places! Now!”

The Governor’s barge glided toward the prison dock, its teak paneling gleaming in the sunlight. Swags of white flowers swished from the prow.

A soft whirl churned the water behind the boat as it swiveled into place at the dock. A glass orb the size of a watermelon hung suspended over the silver prongs of the barge’s motor. Its Jade light glowed so bright that it made spots float over Nok’s eyes when she blinked.

The river gate swung inward. Uniformed guards disembarked and stood at attention. Nok glimpsed the sheen of the Governor’s robes, and then her mother snapped her fingers again. The prisoners pressed their palms together and dropped to their knees.

Nok bowed her head, her stomach flipping somersaults. Was this really happening? If the kids from school could see her now, they would burn with jealousy. She was about to meet the man they all idolized, the hero they learned about in history classes, whose proverbs

they had memorized since nursery school. In just a few seconds, Nok would meet the man who had saved their city from the brink of destruction.

It was a story that every child in Chattana knew.

Long ago, Chattana was the City of Wonders. Giants as tall as palm trees waded in the river while singing fish schooled around their ankles. In the floating markets, vendors sold all manner of magical treats: pears that made you fall in love, cakes frosted with good luck, even a rare fruit shaped like a sleeping baby that would let you live for one thousand and three years if you ate it in a single bite.

The people lived blessed lives. Wise old sages traveled down from the mountains to share their wisdom, heal the sick, and grant wishes. But most people in Chattana had all they could wish for — at first.

The city prospered and grew. The houses stacked on top of each other, higher and higher. The canals became crowded. Unfortunately, magic doesn't like a crowd.

As Chattana swelled, the wonders thinned away. The shy giants wandered north and never returned. The singing fish were netted for rich men's dinners. Bakers began frosting their cakes with plain sugar — it was cheaper than luck and just as sparkly. And the wise sages stayed on their mountaintops.

At first the people of Chattana didn't mind. They were successful and too busy to care about those old-fashioned things. The city spread wider. Buildings rose higher. There was more of everything, but it still wasn't enough. Greed made people careless, and that was a mistake.

No one knows how the Great Fire started. In one rainless night, the City of Wonders became the City of Ashes. Every building and nearly every boat burned. Chattana had always been isolated from its neighbors, but the destruction was so great that no one could have helped them anyway. The few who survived the Great Fire suffered miserably. The sun seared down during the day, and at night there was no shelter from the drenching rains. Disease spread. Fights broke out over what little food remained.

The people missed the wonders then. They despaired, sure that the end was near for all of them. But somewhere among the ruins there must have been one luck-frosted cake left. Because out of the forest came a man who carried magic that no one had seen in more than a century.

That one man turned everything around. He brought Chattana back to life.



Chapter 4

Nok kept her head bowed, but she couldn't resist popping one eyelid open. The Governor walked past her, leaving the scent of lemongrass trailing behind him.

Another snap from Nok's mother, and the prisoners sat back on their heels, palms still pressed together at their chests. Nok blinked, hardly able to believe that she stood just a few yards away from Chattana's great hero.

He looked ordinary. Nok didn't know what she'd been expecting. It's not like he would be floating in on a cloud, or anything like that, but the man standing before them could have been any man. He was taller than her father, but not by much. His face was smooth and pale, the color of milky tea. He smiled briefly as her father greeted him, and only then did faint age lines appear at the corners of his eyes.

Her father seemed in awe of him, too. Or maybe he was just afraid of messing everything up. He could

hardly meet the Governor's eyes as he stepped forward and cleaned his glasses yet again.

"This is a very special day for us all," her father announced. "His Grace, our Governor, honors us with his presence. As you know, His Grace gives such thought and care to your reform. We are . . ." The warden looked down the line of prisoners, and his eyes became glassy and sad behind his spectacles. His voice drifted off.

Come on, Dad. You can do it, Nok thought, willing him to gather up his thoughts.

Nok's mother cleared her throat softly.

"We — we are so blessed to have you with us today, Your Grace," her father stammered. He was supposed to give a longer speech, but he must have forgotten it. "We will now serve a meal, after which my wife has planned entertainment in your honor."

Nok's mother smiled stiffly. She flicked her fingers at the kitchen staff.

Nok's nostrils filled with the smell of garlic and meat. The cooks carried big steaming pots out of the kitchen to the tables under the pavilion. They set the pots on top of metal stands that cradled Crimson orbs to keep the food bubbling and hot.

The prison children all perked up. The moonfaced

boy even licked his lips. Nok wished they wouldn't look quite so hungry.

The prisoners bowed, then made an orderly rush to the pavilion. Nok herded the twins behind their brother, to wait their turn to be introduced to the Governor. She told herself not to be nervous. After all, she'd been practicing what to say to him for weeks now.

As she waited, her eyes wandered to the boy with the sticking-up hair. He had been near the front of the line, and he was already slurping up the last bits of food from his bowl. She tried not to stare, but she found her eyes drawn to him. He seemed so different from the other children. He looked around, taking in everything. He stared at the Governor intensely, though he kept a respectful distance.

Suddenly, he turned his head and then stood up and hurried toward the boy with the round face, who had tears running down his plump cheeks. A full bowl of chicken and rice lay spilled on the ground at his feet.

Two older girls stood beside him, cracking their knuckles. The boy with the sticking-up hair strode up to the tallest girl and without a word, stomped on her bare foot. Nok gasped.

"Nok!" her mother snapped.

She turned to see her family staring at her. Even

her father looked mortified. With a flush of embarrassment, she realized she was supposed to be greeting the Governor at that very moment.

Nok's practiced speech flew right out of her head. Her cheeks burned as she bowed. "I'm very sorry that I was distracted, Your Grace. It's just that . . ."

"Just that what?" asked her mother, impatience edging her voice.

Nok pulled down the cuffs of her dress. "It's just that I think that boy over there is fighting."

Her mother's lips parted, horrified. "*What* boy?"

Nok pointed him out. The older girl was howling now, clutching her wounded foot.

Nok's mother stormed toward the children. "You there," she said to the sticking-up-hair boy. "What do you think you're doing?"

The boy froze. "Oh, ma'am, I, well, I just saw —"

"You saw that we were busy, so you thought you could misbehave, hmm?"

"No, ma'am, it isn't that. You see, these girls —"

The girl he'd stomped on wailed and hopped on her good foot.

"Hush!" snapped Mrs. Sivapan. "You dare to start fights on a day like this?" She looked ready to swallow the boy whole.

His spine straightened. Nok couldn't believe the way he was looking at her mother — as though he was right and she was wrong.

“My friend has been waiting for this food,” said the boy. “And they —”

“How *dare* you talk back to me!”

The Governor glided toward the boy and spoke in a deep, smooth voice. “Allow me to handle this, Madam Sivapan.”

The entire courtyard hushed. Nok's mother patted down her hair as she stepped back to make room for him. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

The boy swallowed and wiped his palms against the sides of his trousers. He bowed to the Governor. When he raised his head, he had a hopeful, almost happy, look in his eyes.

The prisoners and staff had inched closer to see what was going on. Everyone pretended to eat as they leaned forward, listening.

“Is it true, child?” asked the Governor. “You were fighting?”

“Your Grace, it is the greatest honor to finally meet you,” the boy said breathlessly. “I know that of everyone, you will see that —”

“Tut-tut,” the Governor chided. “Now is not the time

for flattery. It is the time for truth. Tell me. Did you hurt this girl, yes or no?"

The boy stood wide-eyed, with his mouth open. He nodded.

"Do you know why I'm here?" the Governor asked.

"To . . . to make sure we're being treated fairly?"

The Governor stared at him for an uncomfortably long moment. "I am here to remind you all of the price of breaking the law. Tell me, child, are the nights dark here in Namwon?"

The boy nodded.

"As they should be," said the Governor. "Chattana is a city of light, but that light must be earned. That is why I had this reform center built here, away from the city. To remind the people that wickedness has a price. You see, light shines only on the worthy."

The boy continued staring, speechless, as the Governor took a half step back. He raised his arms, palms up. The air grew thick, the way it does before a storm. The hairs on Nok's arms stood on end and her scalp tingled.

Everyone in the courtyard seemed to be holding their breath. A pinprick of light appeared in the Governor's palm, like a hovering firefly. It shone brighter, then brighter still, swelling to the size of a marble.

The little ball of light was blindingly bright, even brighter than the orb that powered the Governor's boat. But it didn't seem hot. If anything, the courtyard felt a little cooler than it had a moment before.

A chill raced up the back of Nok's neck. She had grown up surrounded by the Governor's magic, but few people ever got to see him actually use his powers. She shivered, thrilled and frightened at the same time. The man may have looked ordinary, but he was far from it.

Everything in Chattana — every orb, every cook-stove, every boat motor — all of it ran on the Governor's light-making powers. Once he arrived, there was no more need for fire, no more danger. The orbs lit the night; they powered magnificent machines; they had made Chattana prosperous again.

The city had transformed in more ways than one. The Governor hadn't just made light. He had made laws. Chattana had become the City of Rules, the City of Order. Now there would never be another Great Fire. The people would never have to suffer like that again.

The Governor reached his other hand into his pocket and drew out a glass orb, clear and thin as a soap bubble. "Light shines on the worthy," he repeated, placing the orb

into the boy's hand. "All others fall into darkness. Tell me, child, do you want to remain in darkness forever?"

The boy's throat bobbed as he swallowed. He shook his head.

The Governor closed his fingers over the light in his hand and touched the glass orb. The air between him and the boy wavered and crackled. A second later, everyone in the courtyard gasped.

The Governor's hand was now empty. The light had traveled into the orb, filling it with a Gold glow. Trapped inside the glass, the Governor's light was still bright, though a little less raw and frightening than it had been a moment before.

"Tell me," said the Governor. "Will you be a good boy from now on?"

The boy stared at the light in his hand, speechless. Nok realized this might be the first time he had ever been this close to a Gold orb.

Nok's mother stepped forward. "He will, Your Grace — we will see to that, of course." She turned to the boy. "I hope you appreciate His Grace's generosity! For him to give you that light — and Gold light, no less! — is a kindness I'm not sure you deserve. But, please, Your Grace, allow us to convey our gratitude to you with a song we have prepared in your honor."

She clapped her hands overhead, the signal for the women prisoners to break into the number they had rehearsed for the occasion.

The small courtyard rang with the sound of their voices. Nok's mother beamed. Her siblings smiled perfect smiles. Everything was back on track and going smoothly.

All eyes were on the Governor, who bent down to whisper some last comforting words to the wayward boy before turning to watch the prisoners' performance.

But Nok was watching the boy. He stood staring at his palm. The hopeful, happy look had left his eyes.

The orb in his hand had gone dark.



Chapter 5

You're no fun anymore," said Somkit. He said this a lot lately.

"I thought you wanted me to lie low," said Pong. "Stay out of trouble."

"Yeah, well, I didn't mean for you to turn into a tree stump. Besides, since when do you listen to anything I say? Seriously, what's up with you?"

Pong shrugged. He knew he'd changed. No more scuffling with older girls, no more arguments with guards. Pong had become quiet. He just didn't feel like talking.

It had been three months since the Governor's visit. Pong had been so excited that day, even though he hadn't dreamed that he'd actually get the chance to tell the Governor how much he admired him. And when the chance did come, everything had gone so very wrong. Pong would have thought it was all a bad dream if he didn't still have the faded glass orb tucked behind his mat in the boys' bunk room.

Every night Pong lay there, with the used-up glass close to his head. He could still remember the orb's beautiful Gold glow — so much brighter than the Violet orbs they had to make do with at Namwon. He could still hear the Governor's words. Not the words of his speech — those famous phrases printed on posters and in schoolbooks. No, the words that haunted Pong were the ones the Governor had spoken in his ear as the prisoners began their song.

“Look at them,” he'd whispered to Pong, nodding at the prisoners. “They go free, but they always come back. Year after year, the jails are full. The world is full of darkness, and that will never change.” And then the Governor leaned a half inch closer to Pong. He looked into Pong's eyes with his own cold stare. “Those who are born in darkness always return. You'll see. You and I will meet again.”

And then the Governor had squeezed his fingers tight, and the orb in Pong's hand had gone dark.

That was when Pong realized how stupid he'd been. Had he really thought he'd grow up to work for the Governor himself? The Governor would never let someone like him even come near. Pong's dreams of a life outside Namwon vanished in that instant. Things wouldn't be any different out there — not for him.

The world is full of darkness, and that will never change.

It didn't matter what he and Somkit did or how old they got. They would be in the dark wherever they went.

Pong didn't share his thoughts with Somkit. He closed them inside himself, where they hardened into a physical thing, making a box around his heart. And when night fell and the lights of Chattana blazed across the water, and Somkit chattered on and on about orb motors and the latest speedboat models, Pong stayed silent. He turned his face away from the river gate. If anything, the lights only made Namwon seem darker.

Though the nights had changed, the days for Pong and Somkit were the same. For Somkit, that meant fruit scavenging.

Mangoes were the only fruit the prisoners were allowed to have, and only then because they dropped straight into their arms. But the prison guards, like most people in Chattana, lived for their fruit. Once a week, after payday, they would wait on the boat dock and wave down the fruit boats heading to the floating markets in the city.

The prison children would press their faces against the metal gate and sniff the sweet scent of mangosteens

and rambutans, the acid aroma of the pomelos and green oranges. They would suck the fruit-flavored air down their nostrils and roll it around on their tongues. But there was one fruit boat they would not smell.

Durian is called the King of Fruits. It's creamy and rich, more like custard or pudding than something you'd expect to find growing on a tree. Its flavor is musky, buttery — sweet at first, tangy at the end. It makes the back of your neck hot to eat it. It tastes like heaven.

It smells like the opposite.

After flagging down the durian boatman, the guards would carry the enormous spiky-skinned fruit to the wooden table under their shaded pavilion. They hacked the fruit open with a machete, careful not to get the juice on their hands or clothes. They scooped out the yellow flesh inside and rolled their eyes back in their heads with pleasure.

After an hour, the ground all around the table would be littered with piles of durian husks, stinking like a dying mongoose. That's where Somkit came in.

Somkit was the only kid in Namwon who didn't mind the smell of durian. He was happy to gather the stinking, sticky rinds and cram them into the trash baskets by the river dock. The guards rewarded him for his help by letting him scrape up any remaining fruit. The

baskets didn't do much to hide the smell, but luckily the trashman would come in his boat that same evening to dump them downriver.

One hot afternoon, the guards had just finished off a particularly ripe, particularly smelly durian, and more husks littered the pavilion ground than usual.

Somkit held one of the rinds, scraping out the last bit of flesh with his fingers. "Hey, Pong, help me take these to the trash."

"No way," said Pong, holding his nose and breathing through his mouth. "That's your thing, not mine."

"Come on, don't be a jerk." Somkit coughed.

Pong's ears tuned to the raspy sound. Somkit had trouble breathing. Running or doing anything active could make him collapse into a fit of coughing. A few times it had been really bad, and Pong had watched him choke and gasp like a fish drowning on dry land.

"Are you okay?" Pong asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine," said Somkit. But he coughed again, three times. His eyebrows shot up with each cough like someone was poking him in the ribs.

Pong was pretty sure it was a trying-to-get-out-of-work cough, but he rolled his eyes and grumbled, "Fine, let's get it over with."

He gulped in a big breath and started picking up the

rinds with the tips of his fingernails. The juice oozed onto his wrists as he followed Somkit to the trash.

The trash baskets sat near the river dock, on the other side of the guards' storage hut. The baskets reeked sweetly, like raw chicken left in the sun all day. Pong opened the lid and gagged at the rotting smell of old durian mixed with old bananas, old orange peels, and old eggshells. He dumped his durian rinds in with the rest.

"I'll go back and get what's left," said Somkit. "Cram all that down to make room, okay?"

"Oh, come on," protested Pong.

"Just do it," said Somkit, making the same eyebrow-cough as he walked away. "I'll be right back."

Pong waited, craning his face away from the durian stench. When Somkit still hadn't come back, he leaned around the corner of the storage shed to look for him. It was the hottest part of the day, and the prisoners lay dozing or chatting in the shade on the other side of the courtyard. The guards, full and happy, reclined on the steps, picking their teeth.

Pong had their schedules memorized, and he knew they wouldn't get up for another forty minutes, when they changed shifts. No one in the entire prison was paying attention.

Pong had never thought about escaping Namwon

before, but now the opportunity lurched up like a mud-skipper and slapped him across the face with its tail. He could get out of Namwon. Not when he was thirteen. *Now.*

Without pausing to think, Pong tipped the basket and climbed inside. He took one last gulp of semi-fresh air and wriggled down under the trash. He nearly threw up as he pushed the durian skins, orange rinds, and banana peels up around him, packing them over his head, covering his face.

He breathed through his mouth as shallowly as he could. With one eye pressed against the straw weave of the basket, he could see a blurry, golden view of what was happening outside.

He froze when he heard footsteps coming closer. Someone swung open the basket lid and held it open for a long time. Pong listened but couldn't tell who stood there. Somkit? A guard? Whoever it was, they shut the lid and walked away.

Surely Somkit would wonder where he'd gone. Surely he would start asking if anyone had seen Pong. But no one called for him. And Somkit never came back.

Pong sat gagging in the basket, stinky juice dripping off his hair and down the bridge of his nose. He didn't know if he could make it until the trashman came back. The whole thing began to feel like a really bad idea. Pong

was ready to give up and get out, but now the guards had moved back into position and would see him if he climbed out of the basket. He'd have to wait until sun-down for the next shift change.

As the sun began to set, the trashman arrived. When Pong heard him whistling, he was seized with terror. He was sure that when the man lifted the basket, he'd realize it was too heavy.

Pong's nervous stomach writhed like a bowl of eels. What had he been thinking? He was going to get caught any moment. And then what would he say? *I fell into the basket, you see. I tried to call for help, but no one heard me. Please don't put me into solitary confinement. Being inside a basket of durian is punishment enough.*

One benefit of being underfed is that you don't weigh much. The trashman lifted the basket with just a little more effort than usual, hauled it to the river dock, and plopped it into his boat.

Pong couldn't see much of what was happening, but he swore he spotted his friend's silhouette standing at the gate. Suddenly, he realized everything he was leaving behind. *No! Wait!* he thought. *I can't go without Somkit!*

But it was too late. The trashman shoved the boat away from the dock with his bare foot and they were off, down the river.

A decorative graphic consisting of several thin, overlapping, light-colored swirls that originate from the top left and flow towards the right, framing the chapter title.

Chapter 6

Pong crouched inside the basket, one eye pressed against the straw, trying to see the world outside. By now the sun had gone down, and it was difficult to make anything out. Even inside the basket, he felt too exposed, like he was naked. He scooted farther down, wincing as the spiky durian rinds jabbed into his skin.

The zippy whir of the trashman's small orb motor rose in pitch as he steered the boat out into the central channel of the river. If Somkit were there, he'd know what model the motor was just from the sound.

Larger boats with more powerful motors passed by, throwing up waves that rocked the little boat. Pong could make out hazy pinpricks of light beaming from the houses lining the riverbanks. The lights and the boats grew in number as they moved downriver.

Pong's stomach now churned with excitement more than fear. Finally, he was going to see the city up close.

He heard it first. The buzz of the orb lights sounded like a swarm of bees flying toward him. He heard shouting and laughing on the shore, a band playing music, and a woman's voice singing, *"Take my hand, oh, my darling, take my hand and dance with me . . ."*

And then the darkness lit up like the inside of a star. They'd reached the heart of Chattana.

Homes, stores, and restaurants lined the water's edge, stacked one on top of the other, lit ceiling to floor in a rainbow of orb lights that blurred together through Pong's tiny basket window. He could hear customers shouting orders, people haggling over prices, babies wailing for their mothers. He smelled sizzling catfish skin and vegetable dumplings and the human odors of too many bodies living too close together.

A herd of bare feet pounded against wood planks. Children shrieked as they ran down one of the gangways that lined the river. Pong heard their laughter, then a dozen splashes close to the boat.

"Hey, you kids, get outta my way!" shouted the trashman, cutting off his motor. "Lazy brats! When I was your age, I already had a job!"

The trashman used his oar to turn the boat down a canal that led away from the main flow of the river. Chattana was a city built on water, with canals serving

the place of roads. People got around by boat or used the crowded gangways and bridges that crossed the canals.

The trashman turned them down another canal, then another, picking up more baskets of rotting garbage before returning to the wide highway of traffic on the river. The boat dipped up and down on the wake of barges as they crossed to the western shore. The West Side of Chattana was also lit up bright as a sunrise, but with a difference. Unlike the rainbow chaos of the East Side, the charged orbs of the West Side were all Gold.

Pong's heart ached at the sight. He realized that this side of town was what he and Somkit had seen from the river gate every night when they dreamed of someday walking free under all those lights. And now here he was, almost close enough to touch them.

The West Side was so quiet. The orbs hanging off the trees barely hummed, and the music played softly. Even the smells were sweet and clean. Canals branched out from the main river, just like on the East Side, but here, the sidewalks weren't nearly so crowded. Pong could just make out the tidy rows of buildings through his pinprick window in the basket.

The trashman also got very quiet as he pulled alongside one of the docks. Servants loaded baskets into the

boat without a word. The trashman kicked up his orb motor and they were off again, downriver.

The boat rocked up and down, and up and down. Pong felt those eels in his stomach writhing again, but this time it was seasickness.

Don't throw up. Don't throw up, he told his stomach. Sadly, his stomach didn't listen. He clutched the sides of the basket, lost in a woozy fog.

Back and forth the boat went, crossing the river as the trashman made his way south to all his stops. Pong's mind clouded over in a haze of seasickness, and he didn't notice until too late that the boat had stopped.

His eyes popped open in time to realize that his basket was being picked up and tipped over the side. Rotten durian rinds showered over him as he tumbled into the black water.

Pong, who'd lived his whole life inches from the river, didn't know how to swim.

His feet kicked and his hands clawed at the dim glow of the surface. He managed to fight hard enough to get his face above the water. He sucked in a breath of air and a pint of river as his head went back down. Pong didn't care about getting caught and taken back to prison anymore. In fact, he was splashing and glugging and waving his arms as high above the water as he could.

But the trashman was eager to drop off his cargo and get back to the lights of the city. He revved his motor and sped back upriver. He didn't see or hear Pong's pitiful splashes.

According to law, the trashman had to dump his baskets outside the city limits, where the river made a wide bend. Here, the current was slow and the water clogged with trash of all sorts: fruit rinds, broken boxes, torn fishing nets, empty rice sacks, nine-year-old prison escapees.

Pong was so exhausted that he gave up trying to swim. But the trash wedged itself under his armpits and the balls of his feet, as if it wanted to be useful one last time before sinking into the silt at the bottom. Pong's fingers gripped the edge of a sheet of plywood. Ready to sink, he found instead that he was floating, buoyed up by the garbage.

The current carried him around the bend, where the river narrowed again and flowed a little faster. Pong held tight to his wooden life preserver as he drifted downstream. Seeing his chance, he kicked and wiggled his body, aiming for the bank.

By the time he reached the shore, he'd floated out of sight of the city. He climbed up the long muddy bank, out of breath and shivering in the wet clothes clinging to

his body. He looked up at the stars, dim and tiny compared to the lights of Chattanooga.

Pong had done it. He had escaped. He was out in the world for the first time.

He knelt in the mud in the dark in the trash and cried.



Chapter 7

Pong woke up to a chicken pecking his foot. “Ah! Get away!” he shrieked, kicking the scrawny bird.

The chicken squawked and fluttered into the brush. Pong cradled his injured foot in his lap. To be fair to the chicken, Pong’s skin was so wrinkled and white from lying in the soggy mud that it did look like a maggot.

Pong stood up and looked out across the gray-green water. The other side of the river was thick with trees. He looked up. This side of the river was thick with trees. There was no city, no buildings, nobody. In truth, Pong had drifted only a few miles south of Chattana, but to him it seemed as if he’d entered an impenetrable wilderness. He imagined tigers ripping the flesh off his bones and pythons strangling him slowly.

What was he going to do? Where was he going to go? The sides of his empty stomach smacked

together. *Somkit must be having breakfast right now*, he thought.

He'd never been without his friend for more than a few minutes. To realize how far away they were from each other gave him an itchy, panicky feeling.

A horn sounded upriver, and a large cargo barge floated slowly into view. Pong flattened himself onto the mud. As he waited for it to pass, his eyes went to his left wrist. He rubbed his thumb over the bright-blue ink of his prison mark, as if that could make it disappear.

All prisoners in Chattana were tattooed with the name of their prison. Pong and Somkit had gotten theirs when they were babies. The ink was permanent, set with the light from a powerful Gold orb owned by the Governor's office. No one could make it disappear except maybe the Governor himself.

If anyone saw it, they'd know immediately that he'd run away. When a prisoner was released, the prison crossed out their mark with a line and added a little star symbol. Without that bright-blue symbol, Pong was a fugitive. If he got caught, they'd take him right back. Worse, they might take him to Banglad, the men's prison. From the stories the guards told, Banglad made Namwon seem like a fancy hotel. The Governor's words

pounded in Pong's temples: *Those who are born in darkness always return.*

Pong shivered and rubbed his bare arms. His journey in the trash boat might be the closest he'd ever get to walking free under Chattana's lights. Now he'd be lucky if he could manage to avoid being arrested.

Heavy clouds hung overhead. The rainy season would arrive any day, swelling the river and washing out the roads. He needed to get moving. But where to?

He couldn't go back to the city, but if he followed the river downstream, he knew it would eventually lead to the sea. The Governor, the police, the warden, none of them had any power over him once he stepped off the sand. He could get on a boat that would take him out of their reach forever, where no one would have heard of Namwon or know what his tattoo meant.

Pong had seen a picture of the ocean once, in a book. In the picture, the water wasn't gray-green, like the river. It was blue. That color of blue filled Pong's mind as he put his head down and started walking south.

He kept to the ditch along the river road so that he could duck out of sight whenever a rare oxcart came rumbling by. The day turned hot and sticky. Sweat rolled down the side of his nose and dripped into his mouth.

Now he begged the rains to start, so he could have something to drink. He did manage to find a clutch of hard green bananas growing along the road, but by midday, his hunger hurt so bad he thought he would faint from it.

All morning he had been drawing closer and closer to a cluster of small mountains — lumpy and green at the top, with sheer gray sides where the rock was too steep for the jungle to cling to. The road made a bend to the right, then back to the left, and then all of a sudden the mountains loomed right above Pong. Here, the road split. The main road turned inland, away from the river. A narrower track, barely wide enough for an oxcart, continued on, straight toward the mountains.

Pong frowned. Could this be right? Those dumb mountains seemed to be perched right along the river, standing smack between him and the sea. He didn't like the idea of climbing a mountain with nothing but green bananas in his belly. But what if the main road never led him to the sea at all? What if it led to a town? What if people stopped him and asked questions? If anyone saw his tattoo, he didn't think he'd have the strength to run away.

Pong chose the mountain track.

Good decision, he told himself as he huffed up and up the track, as it wound around the mountain, as the

river got farther and farther below the gray cliffs.

Very good decision, he thought as night fell, as he curled into a ball under a bush, half on the road, half off it, as the clouds finally cracked open and released a river of rain.

A decorative graphic consisting of several thin, overlapping lines that form a large, flowing swirl shape, starting from the top left and curving around the chapter title.

Chapter 8

Pong opened his eyes. He was hungry, wet, muddy, and cold, in that order. The rain had stopped, and the sky was just beginning to lighten. He sat up. He smelled something.

Cooked fat.

That smell drew him in like a fish with a hook in its nose. He followed it up the road, around a curve, to a small wooden house set among the trees. The house was little more than a shack, but Pong stared at it in wonder. The front was lit by a soft, golden glow.

The only orb lights they'd had at Namwon were Violet (for the courtyard and classrooms) and Crimson (for cooking and boiling the laundry). On his journey past Chattana City, Pong had gotten a brief view of the other colors, too: Blue, Amber, Jade, and — on the West Side — Gold.

But the light in front of the house behaved strangely. It seemed to shift and dance around. It was soft and warm at the same time, with no buzz. Instead, Pong heard a different sound: a crackle.

He crept a little closer, hiding behind a plant with leaves shaped like elephant ears.

A short man with a round belly stood in front of the house with his back to Pong. He flipped his wrists and something sizzled. Then Pong noticed the smoke drifting up into the dark sky. His jaw fell open.

The man was cooking over a fire.

Pong had never seen one before. After the Great Fire and the arrival of the Governor, flame of any kind had been outlawed in the city. Pong's schooling at Namwon was fairly pitiful, but one lesson was drilled into the prison children over and over again: the greatest danger in the world was fire.

Pong watched entranced as the flames licked the sticks of meat. He opened his mouth and let the pork-flavored air settle on his tongue.

"Don't just stand there!" shouted a woman's voice. Startled, Pong ducked farther behind the bush. "You'd better get going or you're going to miss them!"

"I'm hurrying as fast as I can!" said the potbellied man. "Here, hand me that dish. I think it's ready."

Pong peered through the elephant ears. The man picked up the skewers of meat off the smoking grill and piled them onto a wooden dish. Greasy bits dripped down and sizzled on the coals. Pong gasped to see the man putting his hand just inches from the flames.

A woman with a face caked in half-wet baby powder came out of the house. She dressed the dish with some green onion and herbs and then slapped the man's back. "Go on, get. The monks will already be back at the temple. You'll have to take this straight there."

"Yes, yes, I'm going, I'm going," said the man as he slipped on his shoes.

He shuffled out of his yard and up the dirt road. Pong waited a few seconds, then followed behind, staying in the bushes.

The tall pile of meat teetered on the man's dish as he huffed up the mountain. Pong wished with all his might that one of the skewers would fall off. But the man was like a juggler, never dropping any of it. The dirt lane wound through the jungle and met up with a larger road. There were houses here, but not many, and Pong was able to stay hidden in the vegetation and the early-morning shadows.

The trees and the road opened up all at once to reveal the grounds of a temple. The cluster of buildings

all had stacked-tile roofs that sloped steeply to the sky. Pong had never been to a temple before, but based on what he'd seen in books, this one was on the plain side. Only the roofs were painted, and there weren't any statues or fine carvings around the grounds.

Pong caught the scent of incense cutting through the glorious pork smell. The man puffed up the steps of one of the temple halls. Pong stayed at the bottom of the steps and watched him.

The man set his dish of meat on a low table in the center of the hall, next to other bowls of food donated to the temple monks: garlicky vegetables, fried chicken, and mysterious morsels wrapped in shiny banana leaves. The monks must have already been on their morning walk through their village and brought the food back here.

The man bowed low and respectfully, even though no one was there to see. Pong could hear the deep voices of men chanting farther back in one of the other buildings.

The man stood up with a groan. He jogged back down the steps and disappeared down the dark road. Pong's mouth watered. The monks would be taking their morning meal soon. He didn't have much time.

He leaped up the steps and snatched two skewers of meat off the dish on the table. With one in his hand and

one in his teeth, he whirled around to find a face caked in baby powder staring at him in shock.

The old woman stood frozen, the basket of sticky rice her husband had forgotten swinging from her fingertips. The baby powder flaked off her cheeks as her shock turned to outrage. “Are. You. *Stealing* that? From the monks?”

Pong took the skewer out of his mouth. He held his left arm behind his back and waved the other stick of meat out in front of him, like a wand. Lies tumbled from his lips. “No! No, this isn’t what it looks like! I didn’t steal this. The monks said I could have it!”

A quizzical look spread over the woman’s face, and for a moment, Pong thought she believed him. But then he spotted a group of monks walking toward them, holding their saffron-colored robes gathered in the crooks of their arms. His stomach dropped.

The old woman leaned over Pong, scowling deeply. “We’ll see about that, you little thief!”



Chapter 9

Pong tried to dart around the woman, but she blocked him with her stomach and whacked him on the head with the basket of sticky rice. Bare feet padded across the temple floor as the half dozen monks rushed toward them and clustered around them in a semicircle.

“What’s going on, Mrs. Viboon?” asked one of the younger monks.

Mrs. Viboon bowed respectfully to each of them. “My husband forgot to bring the rice when he brought your breakfast this morning,” she said, swinging the sticky rice and nearly clocking Pong in the face with it again. “When I got here, I caught this boy taking this food, the meal we prepared for you. And when I questioned him, he lied to me. He told me that you gave it to him!”

The monks stared at Pong, tilting their shaved heads at him in confusion. They parted to let an old monk with

a walking stick stand in front of them. His robes were darker, a reddish brown, and his bald head was speckled with moles.

Mrs. Viboon bowed again, even lower this time. “Father Cham, I am very sorry for disturbing your morning prayers. But this boy! He said you told him he could have this food. I can tell he’s lying! Can you imagine? Stealing and lying inside the temple!”

The old man looked at Pong curiously. Pong had never spoken with a monk before, but he knew that monks fasted each day from noon until sunrise the next day. They prepared no meals themselves and depended on other people to feed them. Mrs. Viboon was trying to shame him, but he didn’t plan to stick around long enough for that.

He searched for an opening where he could make a quick run for it. Just as he was ready to bolt, the old monk stepped in front of him, blocking his way with the walking stick. It was such a quick motion for such an old man that it startled Pong, and he dropped the precious pork skewers onto the dusty floor.

“Now, now,” said Father Cham calmly. “You didn’t do what I asked, did you, child?”

“What — what?” squeaked Pong. “I d-don’t know what you mean!”