

STORIES OF CHANGE

To catch a star



The Vanguard Series

The Vanguard Series: Paving innovative ways to combat trafficking and unsafe migration

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Written by Ian Pugh, based on true stories.

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'Those boys are like bees around a honey pot,' said Sengchanh with a smile.


'Are you surprised?' replied Noi. 'Look how beautifully dressed she is. And so confident!'

The two friends were enjoying their favourite afternoon activity, which involved sitting at the marketplace, watching a girl named Khathana who ran her own successful market stall. There were always so many people, especially boys, milling around her stall.

'How old is she anyway?' Sengchanh asked.

'Eighteen,' Noi replied. 'Only a year older than us.'

'Wow,' said Sengchanh, shaking her head. 'She's amazing!'



Later that evening, Noi and Sengchanh were strolling home under the starry night sky.

‘You know, we could be like Khathana,’ Noi announced suddenly. ‘We could have our own successful shop.’

Sengchanh’s first reaction was to laugh out loud. Then she realised that Noi was being serious. ‘Hey, my friend – you are joking, right? It would be easier to catch one of those stars up there!’

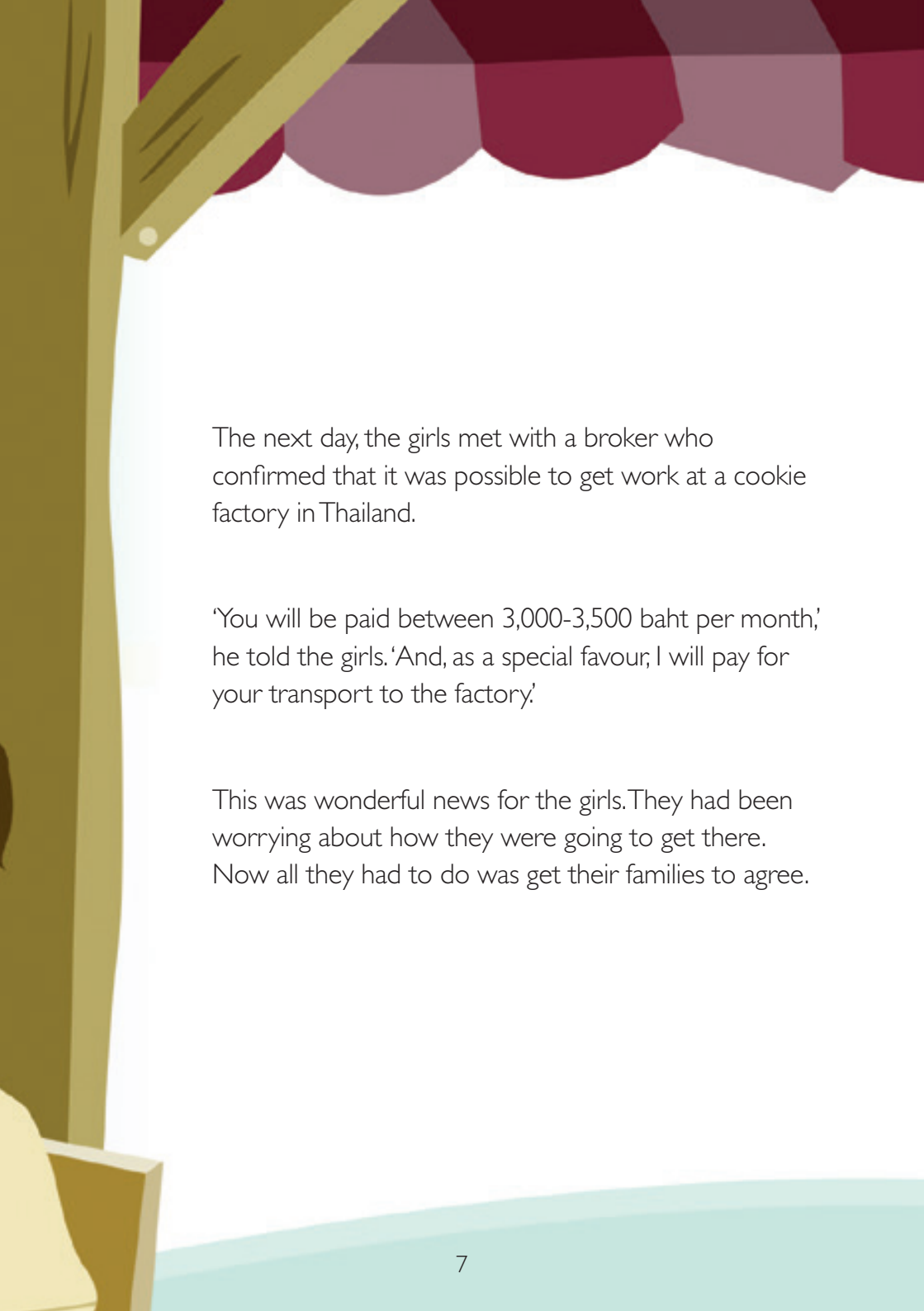
But Noi clearly had a plan. ‘Look, all we have to do is save up some money. And I’ve heard about the perfect job for us. Easy work for good money in a cookie factory in Thailand.’

The girls agreed to explore the idea more the next day.









The next day, the girls met with a broker who confirmed that it was possible to get work at a cookie factory in Thailand.

‘You will be paid between 3,000-3,500 baht per month,’ he told the girls. ‘And, as a special favour, I will pay for your transport to the factory.’

This was wonderful news for the girls. They had been worrying about how they were going to get there. Now all they had to do was get their families to agree.



For Sengchanh, it was easy. Her father had been out of work for some time so her parents welcomed the possibility of any extra income. Noi knew that her dad's approval wouldn't be so easy. After losing her mother to illness years before, she had formed a very strong bond with her dad.

As expected, he was frowning as he looked over the papers from the broker: 'I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you,' he said.

'Nothing's going to happen, Dad,' Noi replied, squeezing his shoulder: 'I'll be with Sengchanh and we'll stay in touch, okay?'


Her dad still looked unsure but he eventually gave her the nod she had been waiting for.

A few days later, the girls found themselves in a small boat, crossing the Mekong River from Laos into Thailand. This was the first time either of them had been out of Laos. They tingled with excitement. The adventure had begun!


On the other side, they were met by a man who said he would transport them to the factory in Bangkok. Everything was going according to plan.





An illustration of a factory window at night. The window is divided into a grid of panes, some of which are dark blue, suggesting it is dark outside. The window is set within a dark green frame. Above the window, a wooden beam with a dark brown cross-shaped mark is visible.

It was dark by the time they arrived at the large factory. The first thing they noticed was the awful smell. This was no cookie factory. When they questioned the man, he said they were lucky to get jobs at all.

An illustration of the back of a person with dark hair, wearing a light-colored shirt and yellow shorts. A dark cross-shaped mark is visible on the person's back, matching the mark on the wooden beam in the top illustration.

They were told to leave their belongings in the cramped sleeping quarters and were then taken directly into the main factory. Noi and Sengchanh stared in disbelief. The place was full of giant containers filled with stinking, fermenting vegetables. Inside each container was a young girl, trampling around, mixing up the vegetables with her feet.

'Get to work!' the foreman barked, pointing at the nearest two containers.



A sign for World Vision is mounted on a dark brown metal frame. The sign is white with an orange triangle in the top right corner. Inside the orange triangle is a white four-pointed starburst. The words "World Vision" are written in black, sans-serif font on the white background of the sign. The background of the entire page is a stylized illustration with a light blue sky, a large white sun, and a building with green and brown sections. A large, light green, rounded shape overlaps the bottom and right sides of the page, serving as a background for the text.

World Vision

Noi's father was concerned that Noi hadn't called during her first week away. When a month had passed and he still hadn't heard anything, he really began to worry. He tried to contact the broker but he seemed to have disappeared. He then visited the local authorities, who suggested that he talk to World Vision.

The next day, Noi's father went to the nearest World Vision office and told them the whole story. One of the staff members phoned the World Vision office in Thailand, where a staff member agreed to pass on all the information to the Thai police.

For now, it appeared that there was nothing more to be done. Noi's father trudged home with a heavy heart.





One and a half years later, Noi and Sengchanh were still locked inside the factory. They had not been paid for their work and were never allowed out, not even to make a phone call.

Anyone who knew them before would never have recognised them. They were now thin and weak from long days of hard labour, two small meals a day and having to sleep on hard floors with up to 17 other workers in one room. To make things worse, the chemicals in the fermented vegetables were damaging their feet, causing horrible, painful rashes. But if they ever complained, they were beaten by the foreman.

They desperately wanted to escape, but there was no way out. They were always being watched.








One evening, the foreman had to leave, and another man was put in charge. Noi and Sengchanh decided this was their chance. At the end of their shift, they slipped up the stairs to the foreman's office, climbed out of a window and down a rickety, old fire escape ladder. The first vehicle they saw was a taxi. They hailed the taxi and leapt inside – they were free!

But it was too soon to get excited. The taxi driver kept glancing at them in the mirror and eventually asked, 'Have you got money?' When the girls shook their heads, he spun the car around and, for a few terrifying minutes, they thought he was taking them back to the factory. Then he pulled up outside a police station.



A stylized illustration on the left side of the page shows the back of a person's head and shoulder. The person has dark hair and is wearing a red garment with a small black cross symbol on it. The background is a light yellow-green color with a vertical green stripe on the far left.

Inside the police station, the girls were nervously telling their story when something completely unexpected happened. The policewoman behind the desk looked at her computer and started to read aloud information about them. They later learned that this was the information that had been passed on by World Vision following the visit from Noi's father.

'What happens now?' asked Noi.

'Now we contact the Lao embassy and get you home,' the policewoman said with a smile.

Noi and Sengchanh hugged each other and the tears started to flow. Was this really happening? Was their nightmare finally over?




The day his daughter came home was the happiest day of Noi's father's life. For so long he had imagined he would never see Noi again. And he blamed himself for letting her go.

'Promise me you'll never leave again,' he said, hugging her tightly, the tears streaming down his face.

'I promise, Dad,' Noi replied. And she meant it.

Later, when she told him about the terrible factory and all the other girls still captive there, Noi's father suggested they talk to World Vision again. In the weeks that followed, the Thai Anti-trafficking Police raided the factory and rescued the girls. Many people also were arrested, including the factory boss and the broker who had organised everything.



The illustration shows a market stall on the left with a person in a blue polka-dot shirt and a woman in a green dress on the right. The stall has a basket of green cucumbers and a tray of brown round items. The background is a light yellow-green gradient.

From that time on, life for Noi and Sengchanh changed in so many ways. With help from World Vision, they received health-care and counselling, vocational training, and financial assistance to set up their own business. The girls now run their own successful market stall right beside Khathana's, and no longer have to rely on World Vision.

They still can't believe they are running their own business, and Noi often teases her friend about what she once said. 'This can't be our shop! It would be easier to catch a star!' she says with a laugh.

But one thing is certain, they will never forget what happened to them and, whenever they can, they take the opportunity to warn others about the risks involved when seeking work in other countries.



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