



BANGKOK 8

JOHN BURDETT

A K N O P F  B O O K

BANGKOK

JOHN BURDETT



VINTAGE CRIME / BLACK LIZARD

VINTAGE BOOKS

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For Sofia

Like all the men of Babylon, I have been proconsul; like all, I have been a slave. I have known omnipotence, ignominy, imprisonment. Look here—my right hand has no index finger.

—Jorge Luis Borges, “The Lottery in Babylon”

In the whole world there is no one who does not welcome it like reason.

—Confucius, talking about jade

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Bangkok is one of the world's great cities, all of which own red-light districts that find their ways in the pages of novels from time to time. The sex industry in Thailand is smaller per capita than Taiwan, the Philippines or the United States. That it is more famous is probably because Thais are less coy about it than many other people. Most visitors to the kingdom enjoy wonderful vacations without coming across any evidence of sleaze at all.

On a related topic, I am honor bound to say that on innumerable visits to Thailand I have experienced only honesty and courtesy from members of the Royal Thai Police Force. Nor have I heard any report to the contrary from other Western tourists. That said, the kingdom's valiant struggle with the kind of corruption that is endemic throughout the Far East has been the subject of numerous newspaper articles, government investigations and learned research projects by respected academics for more than a decade. A novelist is an opportunist and it will be obvious that I have not been shy to adapt many of these stories for narrative purposes, for which I trust I shall be forgiven. I hope that any Thai cop who comes across these frivolous pages will see humor rather than slight. This is a light entertainment within a very Western genre, and nothing more. No offense is intended.

1

The African American marine in the gray Mercedes will soon die of bites from *Naja siamensis*, but we don't know that yet, Pichai and I (the future is impenetrable, says the Buddha). We are one car behind him at the toll for the expressway from the airport to the city and this is the closest we've been for more than three hours. I watch and admire as a huge black hand with a heavy gold signet ring on the index finger extends from the window, a hundred-baht note clipped stylishly between the pinkie and what our fortune tellers call the finger of the sun. The masked woman in the booth takes the note, hands him the change and nods in recognition at something he says to her, probably in very bad Thai. I tell Pichai that only a certain kind of American *farang* attempts conversation with toll booth operators. Pichai grunts and slides down in his seat for a nap. Survey after survey has shown sleep to be my people's favorite hobby.

"He's picked someone up, a girl," I mutter casually, as if this were not a shocking piece of news and clear proof of our incompetence. Pichai opens one eye, then the other, raises himself and stretches his neck just as the Mercedes hatchback races away like a thoroughbred.

"A whore?"

"Green and orange streaks in her hair. Afro style. Black top with straps. Very dark."

"I bet you know who designed the black top?"

"It's a fake Armani. At least, Armani was the first to come out with the black semi-tank top with bootlace straps, there have been plenty of imitators since."

Pichai shakes his head. "You really know your threads. He must have picked her up at the airport when we lost him for that half hour."

I say nothing as Pichai, my soul brother and partner in indolence, returns to his slumbers. Perhaps he is not sleeping, perhaps he is meditating. He is one of those who have had enough of the world. His disgust has driven him to be ordained and he has named me as the one who, along with his mother, will shave his head and eyebrows, which honor will permit us to fly to one of the Buddha heavens by clinging to his saffron robes at the moment of death. You see how entrenched is cronyism in our ancient culture.

In truth there is something mesmeric about the black marine's head-and-shoulder set which has

consumed all my attention. At the beginning of the surveillance I watched him get out of his car at a gas station: ~~he is a perfectly formed giant and this perfection has fascinated me for three hours, as if he were some kind of black Buddha, the Perfect Man, of whom the rest of us are merely scale models with ugly flaws.~~ Now that I have finally noticed her, his whore looks erotically fragile beside him, as if he might crush her inadvertently like a grape against the palate, to her eternal and ecstatic gratitude (you see why I am not suitable for monkhood).

By the time I have inched up to the toll booth in our dying Toyota, he has flown to who knows what celestial bed of pleasure in his late-model Garuda.

I say to my beloved Pichai, "We've lost him," but Pichai also has flown, leaving only his uninhabited corpse, which snores in the seat beside me.

Naja siamensis is the most magnificent of our spitting cobras and might be our national mascot, for its qualities of beauty, charm, stealth and lethal bite. *Naja*, by the way, is from the Sanskrit, and in reference to the great Naja spirit of the earth who protected our Lord Buddha during a dreadful storm in the forest where he meditated.

The elevated expressway is the only road in the city where a Mercedes E series can outrun a Toyota Echo, and I drive without hope or haste (which comes from the devil; slowness comes from Buddha) just for form, feeling out of place amongst the elite vehicles whose owners can afford the toll: Mercedes and BMWs, Japanese four-by-fours, plus a lot of taxis with *farangs* in the back. We fly above the brothel-hotels of the Nana district before I take a slip road into the primeval jam below.

Nobody jams like us. On Sukhumvit at the junction with Soi 4 the traffic is solid in four directions. There is a sentry box here for the traffic cops who are supposed to deal with the problem, but how do two underpaid cops move a million cars packed like mangoes for export? The cops are asleep behind their glass and the drivers have given up honking their horns. It is too hot and humid to honk. I spy on guns and holsters in a tangle at Pichai's feet, along with the radio and the portable siren to clamp on the roof when we finally go into action. I nudge Pichai.

“Better call him, tell him we lost the mark.”

Pichai already has the monkish capacity to hear and understand whilst asleep. He groans, passes his hand through the condemned jet-black locks which I have always envied and bends double to retrieve the Korean short-wave radio. An exchange of static and the unsurprising intelligence that Police Colonel Vikorn, chief of District 8, cannot be located.

“Call him on his mobile.”

Pichai fishes his own mobile out of a pocket and presses the autodial button. He speaks to the Colonel in terms too respectful for modern English to carry (somewhere between “sire” and “my lord”), listens for a moment, then slips the Nokia back in his pocket. “He’s going to ask Traffic to cooperate. If the black *farang* shows up, Traffic will call us on the radio.” I turn up the air conditioning and wind the seat back. I try to practice the insight meditation I learned long ago in my teens and have practiced intermittently ever since. The trick is to catch the aggregates as they speed through the mind without grasping them. Every thought is a hook, and if we can only avoid those hooks we might achieve nirvana in one or two lifetimes, instead of this endless torture of incarnation after incarnation. I am interrupted by more static from the radio (I register *static, static, static* before emerging from the meditation). *Black farang in gray Mercedes reported stopped at Dao Phrya, on the slip road under the bridge.* Pichai calls the Colonel, who authorizes the siren.

I wait while Pichai slips out of the car, clamps the siren to the roof, where it flashes and wails to me

effect on the gridlock, and walks over to the sentry box, where the traffic cops are dozing. At the same time he is strapping on his holster and gun and reaching in his pocket for his police ID. A more advanced soul than I, he gives no sign of the disgust he feels at being trapped in this pollution called life on earth. He would not wish to poison anyone else's mind. Nevertheless, he smacks his hand somewhat violently against the glass of the sentry box and yells at them to wake the fuck up. Smiles and a gentlemanly discussion before the boys in donkey brown (the uniform can appear bottle green in some lights) emerge to take charge. They come up to me in the car and there is the usual double-take when they see what I am. The Vietnam War left plenty of half-castes in Krung Thep, but few of us turned into cops.

There are several inches of slack within which every car can shunt, and our colleagues show considerable skill and cunning in making a space. In no time at all I am able to drive up onto the sidewalk, where the siren terrorizes the pedestrians. Pichai grins. I am skilled at very dangerous driving from the days when we used to take drugs and steal cars together, a golden age which came to an end when Pichai murdered our *yaa baa* dealer and we had to seek refuge in the Three Jewels of the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha. There will be time in this chronicle to explain *yaa baa*.

While I practice close encounters with cooked-food stalls, sex traders and oncoming traffic, wheel spins, split-second lurches and even one hand-brake spin, I try to remember what Dao Phrya Bridge is famous for. Why have I heard of it at all?

We are very happy. *Sabai* means feeling good and *sanuk* means having fun. We are both as we race toward the bridge in demonic haste, with Pichai chanting in Pali, the ancient language of the Gautama Buddha, for protection from accidents. He asks also of the Buddhist saints that we do not accidentally kill anyone who does not deserve it, a touchy point with Pichai.

Krung Thep means City of Angels, but we are happy to call it Bangkok if it helps to separate a *farang* from his money.

I remembered what Dao Phrya Bridge was famous for.

“Squatters, a whole village. They’ve been there for more than twenty years. They are a tribespeople from the northwest, Karen. They have a big still. Gambling and whisky are their main industries, with a little prostitution, begging and theft to make ends meet.”

“They must pay protection. What district is it?”

I shrug. “Fourteenth, fifteenth?”

“The fifteenth is Suvit’s. He’s a bastard.”

I nod. “He will be reborn as a louse in the anus of a dog.”

“Not before he’s spent eighty-two thousand years as a hungry ghost.”

“Is it eighty-two?”

“That is the standard sentence for men like him.”

I furrow my brow. Pichai’s meditation is way ahead of mine, but his mastery of the scriptures is often shaky.

The gray Mercedes can be seen from the bridge as we pass over the canal, which surprises me. It is more than two hours since Traffic told us where it had been sighted, perhaps by one of the squatters. Why would a squatter call Traffic?

Like many things in my country, the slip road from the bridge to the riverbank peters out without contributing to the economy. It is just there, like us. I crunch to a halt on the gravel, which has abruptly replaced the tarmac, about thirty yards from the Mercedes, which is surrounded by men, women and children. They are hunched, ragged, and have automatically assumed the self-effacing postures of the poor when cops arrive. Some of them own the smeared eyes and crooked mouths of the permanently drunk. We will never know which one of them made the call. They will never tell us anything. They are my people.

Pichai gets out of the car first. He is still wearing his gun, which rides on his left buttock as I hurry

to follow him, clipping on my own holster as we stride across the gravel toward the crowd, which makes way for us.

“What happened? What are you all staring at?” Not a murmur, not even a nod, but a woman in a torn T-shirt and sarong, barefoot, far advanced in alcoholic poisoning, raises her head toward the bridge and howls. At the same time I hear Pichai grunt in the way a brave man grunts when another might scream. Despite himself he steps back from the car, enabling me to see. I also grunt, but it is more a way of muffling fear. I look at Pichai, who is a better shot than I. Pichai says: “Look at the door.”

The Mercedes is a five-door elongated hatchback and someone has slipped a C-shaped piece of steel, of the kind used in reinforced concrete, over the handles of the front and rear doors on the driver’s side. Anyone, even a child, could simply roll down the window, remove the crude device and escape, but it would take time, time to work out what was jamming the doors, time to roll down the window. It would also take a mind not clouded by terror.

Many Americans are afraid of snakes, even marines. The Vietcong used them as weapons in the tunnels of Cu Chi to great effect. This one, an enormous python, has wrapped itself around the black man’s shoulders and neck and is trying to swallow his great head. I note that pythons do not normally shake like that, nor do they normally ride in Mercedes. Is the black man shaking the serpent, or vice versa?

I order the people to move away while Pichai takes out his gun. “The bullet might ricochet, it could go anywhere, go back under the bridge.”

When they have done so Pichai crouches at the driver’s window, but is unsatisfied with the angle of his shot. He does not want to hit the marine, who might still be alive, but how to tell if the glass will alter the trajectory of the bullet? He walks quickly and soberly around the car before returning to his original position. “Someone jammed the other doors as well.”

He has mastered himself and I know what is going through his mind. He has vowed to erase the appalling karma which must follow his murder of the *yaa baa* dealer by becoming a Buddhist saint, an *arhat*, in this lifetime. An *arhat* does not hesitate to lay down his life when duty so requires. An *arhat* masters fear.

He crouches, takes careful aim and fires. Good shot! Three-quarters of the python’s head is blown away. Pichai slips the metal clip from the door and opens it, but the huge marine is top-heavy, with the snake now slack around his head, and falls onto the door, which is too much for Pichai to hold. Before I can rush to help, the marine and python have fallen onto my dear friend, pinning him to the ground. I assume that his scream is simply from fright as I go to him, at first not seeing (not believing) the small cobra which has attached itself passionately to his left eye. With a great wrench I drag him from under the marine, take out my gun and lay down beside him while he writhes with the cobra in one hand.

Another characteristic of *Naja siamensis* is that it never lets go. I shoot it through the throat and it is only then that I understand what Pichai is trying to explain through his agony. There are dozens of them, a virtual cascade, shivering strangely and spitting as they pour out of the car. One peep

between buttons on the black man's shirt, which is alive with undulations.

“Don't let them reach the people. Shoot them. They must have been drugged to shake like that.”

He is telling me he is as good as dead, that there is no point radioing for help. Even if they sent a helicopter it would be too late. No one survives a cobra bite in the eye. Already the eye is the size of a golf ball and about to pop, and the snakes are approaching in a narcotic frenzy. Numb at that moment I start to shoot them, becoming frenzied myself. I rush to the Toyota for more ammunition and change clips perhaps as many as seven times. With anguish contorting my features I lie in wait for the snakes which are trapped in the black man's clothes. One by one they writhe out of him and I shoot them off the ground. I am still shooting long after all the snakes are dead.

After we murdered the *yaa baa* dealer our mothers secured us an interview with the abbot of a foreign monastery in the far north, who told us we were the lowest form of life in the ten thousand universes. Pichai had thrust the broken bottle into the jugular of humanity, and therefore of the Buddha himself, while I giggled. After six months of mosquitoes and meditation, remorse had gouged our hearts. Six months after that the abbot told us we were going to mend our karma by becoming cops. His youngest brother was a police colonel named Vikorn, chief of District 8. Corruption was forbidden to us, however. If we wanted to escape the murderer's hell we would have to be honest cops. More, we would have to be *arhat* cops. The abbot is undoubtedly an *arhat* himself, a fully realized man who voluntarily pauses on the shore of nirvana, postponing his total release in order to teach his wisdom to wretches like us. He knows everything. Pichai is with him now, while I am stranded here in the pollution called life on earth. I must try harder with my meditation.

I waited by the car for the van after covering Pichai with my jacket. A police cruiser came with the van and a team began collecting the dead snakes and taking video shots of the scene. It took four men to carry the python, which kept slipping from their shoulders until they learned to handle it. I sat with Pichai and the black American in the back of the van while it raced to the morgue and stood by while the attendants stripped my friend and I tried not to look at the left side of his face. The giant Negro lay nearby on a gurney, his naked body covered in soot-colored buboes and drops of water from melted ice which shone like diamonds under the lights. He wore three pearls in one ear, no earrings at all in the other.

I signed for the small plastic bag of Pichai's personal effects, which included his Buddha necklace and a larger bag of clothes, and went home to the hovel I rent in a suburb by the river. Under the rules I should have gone directly to the police station and begun to make my report, fill in forms, but I was too heartsick and didn't want to face the other cops with my grief. There had been much jealousy about the closeness of my friendship with Pichai.

The dharma teaches us the impermanence of all phenomena, but you cannot prepare yourself for the loss of the phenomenon you love more than yourself.

Pichai's cell phone ran out of prepaid units when I tried to call my mother from my room. There is no telephone in any of the rooms in my project, but on each floor, there is an office belonging to the management company where a telephone is available. Under the eye of the fat female clerk, who is addicted to shrimp-flavored rice puffs, I call my mother, who lives in the steaming plains about three hundred kilometers north of Krung Thep in a place called Phetchabun. She and Pichai's mother are former colleagues, close friends who retired to their hometown together, bought a plot of land and built two gaudy palaces on it; that is to say, the two-story houses with green-tiled roofs and covered balconies are palatial by country standards. While I wait I hear the *crunch-crunch-crunch* of Fat So plowing through her puffs, and the burden of her attention is like a hundred sacks of rice on my shoulders, for she has seen my devastation.

I feel like a coward for not telling Pichai's mother myself, but I cannot face this chore or truth myself not to break down when I speak to her. Nong, my mother, will make a much better job of it than I.

I listen to the ringing tone on my mother's mobile telephone. She changes the model every two years because she always wants the smallest. Now she owns a Motorola so tiny she is able to keep it

her cleavage. I think about it ringing and vibrating between my mother's breasts. She always answers cautiously, never knowing if it will be a former lover, perhaps a *farang* from Europe or America, who has woken up in the middle of the night longing for her. The loneliness of *farangs* can be a fatal disease which distorts their minds and tortures them until they snap. When they begin to sink they grasp at any straw, even a Bangkok whore they had for a week on a sex vacation long ago.

My mother has been retired for more than ten years, but the calls still come from time to time. It is her own fault, because she always arranges for calls to her old mobiles to be patched forward to the new one. Maybe she is still waiting for that special call? Maybe she's addicted to the power she wields over desperate white men?

"Helloo?"

I tell her and for once she has nothing to say. I listen to her breathe, her silence, her love, the woman who sold her body to bring me up.

"I'm so sorry, Sonchai," she says finally. "You want me to tell Pichai's mother for you?"

"Yes, I don't think I could face her grief right now."

"Not as great as yours, my love. D'you want to come up? Stay with me a few days?"

"No. I'm going to kill the people who did it."

Silence. "I know you will. But be careful, darling. This thing seems very big. You'll come to the funeral, of course?"

I have thought about this on the way home from the morgue. "No, I don't think so."

"Sonchai?"

"Country funerals."

Pichai's body will sit in its decorated coffin under a pavilion in the grounds of the local wat, with a band playing funeral dirges all afternoon. Then at sundown the music will liven up, Pichai's mother will have succumbed to community pressure to throw a party. There will be crates of beer and whisky, dancing, a professional singer, gambling, perhaps a fight or two. Dealers will arrive on motorbikes selling *yaa baa*. Worst of all will be the incinerator. In that remote place it looks like something from the early days of steam, with a long chimney, rusting, shaped just large enough to accommodate the coffin, with a tray for a wood fire underneath. The smell of Pichai's roasting flesh will fill the air for days. My soul brother's flesh is my flesh.

"They'll burn him in that thing, won't they?"

My mother sighs. "Yes, I expect so. Come up soon, darling. Or d'you want me to come down to you?"

“No, no, I’ll come. After it’s all over.”

Fat Som is slack-jawed for once when I replace the receiver, a bunch of pink puffs half eaten between her teeth. She wants to say she is sorry, but doesn’t know me well enough. The nature of her karma is that she cannot communicate feelings, because of some defilement from a previous lifetime and is therefore condemned to be fat and resentful. She tries, though, with some futile wrinkling of the brow, which I do not acknowledge as I leave the room. I hear the telephone ringing in the office as I stride down the corridor, and think that Fat Som will have to finish her mouthful of puffs before she answers it. I am on the point of inserting my key into the padlock on my door, which so much resembles the door of a cell, when I hear her calling and, turning, see that she has emerged from her office and is rolling toward me breathlessly, her flesh rippling under her cotton dress. “It’s for you.”

Astonished, for nobody calls me here, I think that it is some mistake and that I will not take the call, but Fat Som is insistent. When I reenter the office she is weeping like a child. I wonder if perhaps my tragedy has snapped her karma, if she will be liberated now, if Pichai died an *arhat* after all and has the power to heal from where he waits on the shores of nirvana? I smile at her (for which she is almost unbearably grateful) as I pick up the receiver.

A man, an American, speaks English into my ear. “May I speak with Detective Sonchai Jipeechaew please?”

It takes me a moment to realize he has attempted to pronounce my family name. “Speaking.”

My English is almost free from a Thai accent, although it contains shades of many others, from Florida to Paris, reflecting a childhood spent in the wake of my mother’s career. I am told that when stressed I speak English with Germanic precision and a Bavarian accent. I will tell you about Friess soon enough.

“Detective, I’m very sorry to be calling you at home at this time. My name’s Nape, I’m the deputy FBI legal attaché at the American embassy in Wireless Road. We’ve just been contacted by a Colonel Vikorn who has informed us of the death of William Bradley, a Marine sergeant who was attached to the embassy here. We understand you are investigating?”

“That is correct.” Shock has distorted my perspective. I wonder if this conversation is taking place on some other planet, or in hell, or even in one of the heavens? I have no sense of gripping the unreality.

“I understand your partner and close friend Detective Pichai Apiradee also died, and I want to extend my sincerest condolences.”

“Yes.”

“You probably know that under a protocol we have with the government of Thailand we have the privilege of access to information you may come by in your investigation of the death of American service personnel in such circumstances, and by the same token we would be willing to share FBI forensic resources with you. When would be convenient for you to come to the embassy to discuss information-sharing—or would you prefer we come to you?”

I want to laugh cynically at the thought of entertaining the FBI in my tiny hovel without chairs.

“I’ll come, but you must give me a little time for the traffic.”

“I understand, Detective. I’d offer to send a car, but I’m afraid that wouldn’t solve the problem.”

“No. I’ll come. I’ll come soon.”

Without returning to my room I descend the concrete staircase to the ground floor. Outside, makeshift shop leans against the wall of the building, with a long green awning which extends almost to the ground. Under the awning louts with many tattoos and almost as many earrings lounge on camp beds, smoking and drinking beer, their numbered jackets slung on the ground beside them. These are the licensed motorbike taxis, Krung Thep’s most dangerous form of public transport, and its fastest.

“American embassy, Wireless Road,” I snap at one of the louts, and kick the side of his camp bed. “Now.”

The louts are local suppliers of *yaa baa*. They are intermittent users, too. From time to time I have toyed with the idea of busting them, but if I bust them someone else will take over the trade and perhaps expand it beyond the scope of these boys. Hit dirt with a stick and you will certainly spread it. Anyway, they buy a lot of their *yaa baa* from police confiscations, so there would be professional consequences for me. Colleagues would complain I’d taken the bread out of their children’s mouths.

The motorcyclist whose bed I kicked jumps to attention and then runs to his bike, a 200 cc Suzuki which must have been very sexy when new, with sculpted lines which run from the teardrop fuel tank to the upturned twin exhausts. Krung Thep has a way of punishing elegance, though, and it looks shabby now, with quite a few dents, mud on the footrests, rusting exhausts, a torn seat. The driver offers me a helmet but I refuse. Helmets for passengers are one of our many unenforceable laws; most people prefer the risk of head injury to the sensation of having one’s brains boiled.

“You really in a hurry?” the kid asks.

I think about it. Not really, but anything to distract my mind, which is starting to implode. “Yes, it’s an emergency.” The kid’s eyes gleam as he presses the start button.

I enjoy the ride because I’m sure the kid is on some drug or other—if not *yaa baa*, then ganja—and on quite a few occasions I am certain I am about to die and join Pichai sooner than expected. It is with disappointment and some surprise that I see the white walls of the American embassy as we turn onto Phloen Chit, and find myself still in the prison of the body.

I pay the boy, then make his eyes widen when I say: “Get me some *yaa baa*. Come to my room tonight.” Excited all over again, he makes wheel squeals as he rides away. Now I am face to face with a bronze eagle in a plaster medallion, a stainless steel turnstile and some heavily armed Thai cops lounging against the walls. I show my ID and tell them I have an interview with the FBI. This is relayed to the American behind the bulletproof glass at the turnstile, who takes my name and makes a call.

In meditation there is a point where the world literally collapses, providing a glimpse of the reality which lies behind. I am experiencing the collapse but not the salvation. The city falls and rebuilds itself over and over while I wait in the heat. I wonder if this is a message from Pichai? Meditation masters prepare us for the shock when we finally experience the fragility of the great out-there. It is supposed to be a very good sign, although for the untrained it presages certain madness.

Fritz was a bastard whom my mother and I both loved for a moment. The others were kinder but somehow we never managed to love them.

While I wait I remember the embassy was rebuilt in 1998, soon after the bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The ambassador appeared on TV to explain, in not-bad Thai, that although America saw no threat from the Thai people, she feared those long porous borders with Cambodia and Myanmar where explosives and heavy armaments could be bought by just about anyone. Now the walls are massive reinforced concrete, capable of withstanding an assault by a ten-wheel truck, and if the truck did succeed in breaching the walls, there is a moat. In the twenty-first century the American ambassador works in a medieval castle. What is the karma of America?

Suddenly the American in the cabin, who might be a marine in plain clothes, decides to let me through the turnstile. One has to adjust to the jerkiness of *farangs*; this one has replaced his first jerk of suspicion with a jerk of hospitality. Through his microphone he says: “The Bureau is expecting you. D’you want to wait in here, in the air-conditioning?”

Something bleeps as I cross the threshold and I see a colorful image of myself and every metal object in my pockets displayed on a monitor on the desk. In the cabin I shiver at the blast of cold air. The young man at the desk, his hair so close-cropped he is almost bald, stares at the monitor for a moment, then asks me for my ID, the number of which he taps into his computer. I see my name appear on the screen. The marine grunts. “You’ve never been here before.” This is not a question, it is what the computer says. “Next time we won’t have to go through all this rigmarole.” As he speaks he nods in the direction of the main buildings as if it were the rigmarole who is now walking mannish toward us, a gigantic ID tag swinging from between her small breasts. Even from this distance I see that the rigmarole’s name is Katherine White, deputy chief of security. About thirty, brunette, intensely athletic, frowning. I feel very Thai, despite my straw-colored hair and sharp nose.

“You have Detective, lemme see, Jiplecreap, for the FBI legal attaché?” Her voice is squeaky over the voice transmission system.

“Yep.”

“I wasn’t expecting him to be in there. Do I come in or do you bring him out? I forget which.”

“I guess I can bring him out. Probably he could make it out all on his own.”

The woman nods gravely. “Okay, let’s do it.”

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