

Charley Brindley



Sea of Sorrows

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Аннотация

A man returns to Thailand after a fifty-year absence. When he was in Bangkok on leave from the Vietnam War, he met a girl and fell in love. After returning to the battlefield, he was critically wounded and shipped to a hospital in San Diego.

A man returns to Thailand after a fifty-year absence. When he was in Bangkok on leave from the Vietnam War, he met a girl and fell in love. After returning to the battlefield, he was critically wounded and shipped to a hospital in San Diego. After recovering from his injuries he goes back to Bangkok looking for Chayan, but she's not there. A year later he returns and one of the other girls tells him Chayan died during a typhoid epidemic. Devastated, he returns to the States, goes to medical school and eventually starts a family. Now, after fifty years, he goes again to Bangkok, but instead of Chayan, he finds his past had been evolving without him.

Содержание

Chapter One	8
Chapter Two	18
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	35

Sea of Sorrows
Book Two of
The Rod of God

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On the cover

Prija is the girl on the right

Siskit is on the left

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Some of Charley Brindley's books

have been translated into:

Italian

Spanish

Portuguese
French
Dutch
Turkish
Chinese
and
Russian

The following books are available in audio format:

Raji, Book One (in English)

Do Not Resuscitate (in English)

The Last Mission of the Seventh Cavalry (in English)

Hannibal's Elephant Girl, Book One (in Russian)

Henry IX (in Italian)

Other books by Charley Brindley

1. *The Rod of God, Book One: Edge of Disaster*
2. *Oxana's Pit*
3. *Raji Book One: Octavia Pompeii*
4. *Raji Book Two: The Academy*
5. *Raji Book Three: Dire Kawa*
6. *Raji Book Four: The House of the West Wind*
7. *Hannibal's Elephant Girl Book One: Tin Tin Ban Sunia*
8. *Hannibal's Elephant Girl: Book Two: Voyage to Iberia*
9. *Cian*
10. *The Last Mission of the Seventh Cavalry*
11. *The Last Seat on the Hindenburg*
12. *Dragonfly vs Monarch: Book One*

13. Dragonfly vs Monarch: Book Two
 14. *The Sea of Tranquility 2.0 Book One : Exploration*
 15. *The Sea of Tranquility 2.0 Book Two: Invasion*
 16. The Sea of Tranquility 2.0 Book 3: The Sand Vipers
 17. The Sea of Tranquility 2.0 Book 4: The Republic
 18. Do Not Resuscitate
 19. Ariion XXIII
 20. Henry IX
 21. Qubit's Incubator
- Coming Soon
22. Dragonfly vs Monarch: Book Three
 23. The Journey to Valdacia
 24. Still Waters Run Deep
 25. Ms Machiavelli
 26. Ariion XXIX
 27. The Last Mission of the Seventh Cavalry Book 2
 28. Hannibal's Elephant Girl, Book Three

See the end of this book for details about the other books

Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

Chapter Eight

Chapter One

I watched a girl strolling along the street, avoiding the crowds of people.

Most of them were young men, in groups of two and three, sometimes more.

Many young women lined the sidewalk, showing as much skin as possible, enticing the men to come inside their tiny rooms for a few minutes of pleasure.

It was past 2 a.m. on Saturday night, but the street was filled. Mostly pedestrians, but some on motor bikes. A few cars were parked along the curb, but no one tried to drive through the mob of people.

A few solitary middle-aged men browsed through the women, even one or two old men, like me. American, British, Australian...? I couldn't tell unless they spoke.

The girl walked past me again, watching the people. She seemed out of place in her pressed baby blue blouse and tan skirt reaching below her knees.

I stepped away from the curb, trying to get a better look at her face. She ignored me.

She's not working? Then what's she doing in Ladprao, Bangkok's busiest sex district? Waiting for someone? Young, maybe eighteen or so.

A group of four Thai men stopped her, asking something.

She shook her head and turned away.

One of the men took her arm, asking again.

The girl jerked away and hurried along the sidewalk, passing close by me. Obviously frightened.

The man who'd taken her arm yelled at her, "*Hi taw nan ca mi kin xeng!*"

It wasn't a pleasant remark.

The four men laughed.

I turned the other way, watching the women work the street. This was my fifth night on the street.

What do I expect to find?

A girl in a pink bikini touched my arm. "You American come with me five little bit minutes?"

I smiled and shook my head.

How do they always know?

I'd left my suit and tie in the hotel room, trying to dress casual. Of course, my face gave me away as Caucasian, but why not British or Canadian?

I just can't shed this American aura.

I started walking down the block, and several more women offered me their wares before I reached the end of it, then turned back to walk on the opposite side of the street.

The magnetism of the beautiful Thai faces drew me like a kitten's dream of a room full of toy mice. The girls who offered themselves—almost pleading for my attention, or rather my money—repelled me. But the ones who stood back, crossed

their arms and dismissed me with a haughty, slow turn of their heads; they were the fire I craved. I loved the arrogant attitude, but none had the right features: Her full lips; impish nose; and the small, almost childlike shape of her face. And her eyes were dark, glowing embers, ready to flare up and burn anyone who came too close. Long black hair thrown back with a flick of her fingers, as if brushing me away. That was how I saw her when we first met.

None could ever match that sweet image, but I wandered on, in search of someone who might.

Maybe, someday, just maybe—

“Leave me alone!”

It was a woman’s voice, behind me. I turned.

The girl!

A young man gripped her biceps. He said something I couldn’t hear.

“No!”

His buddy took her other arm. “Come on. Just for an hour,” he said in Thai. “We’ll pay you.”

It was the same four tormentors from earlier.

She struggled against them.

The other two of their group stood before her, laughing and pointing at her panic-stricken expression.

Many men walked by, glanced at the confrontation, then went on.

“I don’t want to!” she yelled.

The two men pulled her toward a doorway. The other two looked around, then followed.

She cried out for help.

“She said she doesn’t want to,” I said.

The man gripping her right arm glared at me. “Beat it, old man,” he said in English, “before you get hurt.”

“Let her go.”

He shoved me backward, and his pal put out his foot, tripping me. I fell on my butt, hard. The four men laughed while the girl looked around for help.

I stood, grabbing the man’s wrist. “I said, let her go.”

He swung at me with his right fist, but I caught it and twisted his arm over his head and behind his back. When he let go of her arm and lifted his elbow to deliver a blow to my solar plexus, I tightened my stomach. He was apparently surprised to hit hard muscle, and he tried to squirm away, but I hooked my toe in front of his ankle and tripped him. He went down hard.

Two of the others came at me. I sidestepped and slugged the first one’s temple, stunning him. His pal pushed him out of the way and came at me, swinging wildly. I ducked under his arms, spun, and gave him a sharp kidney punch.

The first guy then came off the cement, with a knife in his hand. He grinned at me, flourishing the long blade.

All right, I can handle that knife.

I crouched low, my arms spread apart. “Come on, asshole, let’s dance.”

A crowd had formed around us, and now they backed away, giving us room. The girl stood at the edge of the crowd. She glanced over her shoulder.

I hope she leaves. This may not be pretty.

The knife-guy circled, looking for an opening. I turned, keeping my eyes on his. He made a move to his left, and I went the other way. He lunged for me. I spun on my left foot, bringing my right foot up in a kick to his ribs. The blow staggered him, but for only a step or two.

The second guy pulled something from his waistband, in the back. "That's enough of this bullshit," he said.

The chrome-plated automatic caught the light.

"A gun!" someone said.

"Get back!" another shouted.

The circle of spectators drew away, still mesmerized by the drama taking a deadly turn.

Okay, a knife and a gun. I've got to take out the gun first.

I made a move on the knife-guy. When he stepped sideways, waving the knife at me, I went the opposite way, surprising the man with the gun. He tried to bring the weapon around to get a shot at me, but I already had a grip on his hand. I bent his wrist backward, and the gun went off, firing toward the sky. I then used both hands, pushing hard and twisting the gun sideways.

His finger caught in the trigger guard.

I heard the bones crack, and he cried out as I wrenched the gun from him. He shrank back, holding his broken finger.

I pointed the gun at the knife-guy. He stood, open-mouthed, glancing around for a way out.

I ejected the magazine, then worked the slide, flipping a cartridge from the firing chamber.

The knife-guy stared at the empty gun. I tossed it away and went for him, then he came at me, the knife pointed at my throat.

Before I could make a move for his hand, his other two pals grabbed me from behind, one on each arm. I used them for support and kicked hard, hitting the knife-guy in the side of his chin, breaking his jaw. He cried out, dropping the knife.

I fell forward, taking the two men down with me. They threw their hands out to break their fall.

On my knees, I grabbed one by the hair, smashing his face into the cement. The other one rolled away, but I jumped on him, landing my knee in his stomach, knocking the wind from his lungs. As he struggled to breathe, I slugged him twice in the face. He went out, unconscious.

I glanced at the other one on the cement. He sat, wiping blood from his broken nose. He was finished.

The knife-guy was done for, with a broken jaw. I looked around for the gun-guy and saw him standing on the edge of the crowd, crying over his broken finger.

The gunshot had caused someone to call the cops. At the first sound of the wailing siren, the onlookers melted away into the crowded street. The four thugs, probably not wanting to explain how they got injured, helped each other clear out. Meanwhile,

someone from the crowd ran in to snatch the knife and gun.

I grabbed the girl's hand, leading her away. A block down the street, I turned her back toward the approaching police cars.

"Just walk slow and casual," I whispered.

She nodded, but I felt her hand trembling in mine.

The people in the street were slow to clear a path for the policemen. When the cops reached the place where the fight had taken place, they found only a small smear of blood from the guy's broken nose. Even the gun's magazine and the cartridge I'd ejected were gone, as was the empty shell casing from the bullet that was fired.

The four policemen asked questions, but the bystanders just shook their heads and said they hadn't heard or seen anything.

We walked past the policemen, pretending to be curious onlookers. At a sidewalk café, I pulled out a chair for her. She slumped into it, shaking from the ordeal.

I touched her arm, below the purple bruise. "Is it okay?"

She nodded. "Thank you. That mans would have kill you."
She rubbed her arm.

I smiled. "They don't know street fighting."

A waitress came to our table.

"*Cha yen?*" I asked the girl.

She nodded.

I ordered two of the sweet iced teas with milk. The waitress hurried away.

"Are you hungry?"

“No. How are you called?”

“Saxon. And you?”

“I am Siskit.”

“You’re not working the street?”

“No. I wait for sister.”

The waitress brought our drinks. We sipped.

“This is very good,” I said.

“I like the sugar and milk.”

I nodded.

“My sister works the street.”

“You come every night to wait for her?”

“Yes, but late only Saturday night. We have Sunday off, so we sleep late morning.”

“You live together?”

She drank her tea. “We share apartment in Song Wat road.”

“On the river?”

“Yes. It is nice view of water, and boat, too.”

After Siskit calmed down from her ordeal, she carried on a very good conversation.

“I work in export office, Monday to Saturday,” she said.

“Where did you learn English?”

“In my school we had choice of French or English. Prija and I still hate the French, as our parents always did.”

“Prija?”

“My sister.”

We talked about Bangkok, Thailand in the old days when it

was called Siam, and the shipping business she was involved in.

The crowds thinned out after 4 a.m.

“I must go now, so—” I was interrupted.

“What are you doing with him?”

She came from behind, startling me. I spilled the last of my drink in my lap.

“He was—”

She grabbed Siskit’s arm, turning it for a look at the purple bruise. “He did this to you?” She spoke in Thai, almost shouting.

“Prija, he—”

“You stupid fucking American old geezer!” she shouted in English. “You think you just can come to our home country, hurt our girls, then buy them coffee and shit to make better?”

Thinking she was about to come at me, I stood and backed away.

Siskit caught her wrist, holding her back. “Stop it, Prija. He didn’t do it.” They both spoke in Thai.

“Who, then?” She glared at me. “If not this American old bastard.”

Siskit told her about the men who’d tried to drag her away. Prija narrowed her eyes on me as her sister told the story. Her face softened a little, but not much. Her eyes, like glowing dark embers, started to cool.

Prija was a very pretty brunette with a shapely petit figure accentuated by her tight tan skirt. Without the scowl, her face was more pubescent than the countenance of a young woman.

Siskit stood and reached for my hand. “I thank you for that you did. Them mens would want to hurt me so much.”

“Yeah.” Prija flipped her hair back over her shoulder. “Thanks. Sit now.” She took the other chair next to Siskit.

“It was only four men.” I spoke in their language, smiling at Siskit. “Not six. And just one gun.” I sat and watched Prija’s face.

It took her a moment to respond. “You call that Thai?”

“You speak our language so well,” Siskit said. “Where did you learn?”

“Here.” I nodded toward the street, where the daytime vendors were beginning to filter in. “In Ladprao.”

“Do you live here?”

“No. I’m just a visiting American old bastard.”

“You came to find nice young girl,” Prija said, “to have fucking fun time you can’t get in your own fucking country.” Her eyes flared, ready to burn if I got too close.

I stood and shoved my chair back, then took money from my pocket, peeled off some 100-baht bills, and dropped them on the table.

“*Ratri swasdi*, Siskit (Goodnight, Siskit).”

“That’s too much for two teas,” Prija said in Thai. “You have change coming.”

“Keep it.” I stared at her for a moment, then turned to leave. “You need it more than I do.”

I smiled as I walked away.

That’s what I’m talking about.

Chapter Two

Most of the girls take Sunday off, so I didn't bother going to Ladprao.

In the early afternoon, I took a *tuc-tuc* to *Rattanakosin*, the Old City. It lies in the center of Bangkok, on the banks of the Chao Phraya River. The area is filled with beautiful old buildings from Thailand's rich past, when the country was called Siam.

I boarded an excursion boat to cruise down the river. At a table on the fantail, I ordered a bottle of red wine and light meal of *phat kaphrao*, stir-fried chicken with basil and chili.

While I enjoyed the leisurely meal and lazy cruise, I typed notes on my iPad. It was impossible to write anything meaningful, but I recorded my thoughts as they were brought out by the passing scenery.

There's something evocative about drifting through a landscape; your imagination latches onto visions and turns them into flights of adventure.

A colorful ninth-century palace brings to mind a captive princess longing for the freedom of my passing boat.

An old man in a skiff, tossing a net into the murky water. I imagined him to be a spy, keeping watch on the palace.

A young man and girl strolling along the river-walk, hand in hand, reminded me of another couple, fifty years gone.

So easy to slip back into that fantasy world, where all things

were possible. It would be only a short separation, I told her, then we'd be together for the rest of our lives. We spent many evenings strolling and building the dreamy framework of our future.

But the war had different plans for us. A sea of sorrows awaited.

A blast on the ship's whistle brought me back to the harsh present as the boat nosed into the dock.

* * * * *

Wednesday night, 1 a.m., I was back on the street.

I saw Prija leaning against a wall, chatting with one of the other girls. They wore tight micro-skirts and tube tops. As they talked, they glanced at their phones, occasionally clicking out a message, but always keeping an eye on the passing men.

I crossed the street, wanting to avoid her. Actually, I didn't want to avoid her; just avoid talking to her.

As I watched from a doorway, she pushed herself away from the wall and hurried to cut a man from the heard. I don't know what she saw, but she definitely wanted him. He was a well-dressed Thai, of middle age. Maybe a businessman.

The negotiations took only a minute. He gave her some money, then she took his hand to pull him toward a door leading to a series of small, dingy rooms.

I turned away. I don't know why that tiny drama bothered me. I knew before I left the hotel what she'd be doing.

So why come to watch?

Three blocks away, I crossed the street and started back. At

the little sidewalk café where Siskit and I had talked last Saturday night, I ordered tea, then turned on my iPad.

As I began to write, I was surprised by the flow-groove that opened before me.

Sometimes when I work, all I do is type. Most of it is trashed the next day when I edit the story, but other times I fall into a trance where the typing becomes writing. It might last a few minutes, or it might go on for hours. When I'm in that channel, with my imagination carrying me along, I think of it as a flow-groove, a narrow channel twisting before me, leading I know not where. I so enjoyed the ride and opening of new vistas along the way.

The waitress came to ask if I needed anything else. I ordered a meal so I could continue to occupy the table without being bothered.

These writing channels open to me only rarely, and they usually occur after some emotional event. When I'm in that groove, I have to stay there until it runs its course to that inevitable burnout of the flame, because it might be days or even weeks before it ignites again. The intervening time between these episodes, I spend on editing what I've written.

I had no idea of the passing time until someone spoke to me in English.

“What are you doing?”

I knew it was Prija without looking up. “I *was* writing.”

“Writing what?” She sat at the table without being invited and

took a piece of baked pork with her fingers.

“Why don’t you have a seat and eat my dinner?” I said in Thai.

“Your dinner is cold.”

“I like it cold.” I’d forgotten all about it. “What the hell?” I glanced around at the street vendors starting their daily routines.

“This happens every day at sunrise.”

“Sunrise?”

“Yeah.” She leaned her elbows on the table, watching me.

“Are you senile as well as stupid?”

“Those two might be the same thing.”

“What are you writing?” She craned her neck to see the screen of my iPad.

“Nothing you could understand.” I turned it toward her.

She read the page, then flipped to the previous page. She read and flipped again. “This makes no sense.”

“Well, if you’re going to read it backward, it might be hard for your pea brain to comprehend.”

“Pea brain? You talking about the vegetable or piss?” She drank from my glass.

“In your case, piss.”

“Your tea’s warm as piss.” She held up the glass for the waitress to see.

“I guess you know a lot about urine temperature.”

“I know a lot about a lot.”

“You come into my world uninvited, eat my food, insult my writing, drink my tea, and now I guess you expect me to pay for

your drink as well.”

“Why not? You got money to burn. What are you doing here, stalking me?”

The waitress brought her a fresh glass of tea.

“I was waiting for Siskit so I could have an intelligent conversation, but I got you instead.”

“You’re lucky. I normally charge men for this.”

“For what? Obnoxious belligerence?”

“Most men get off on that.”

“Most men are idiots.”

“All men are idiots.” She sipped her tea. “Some are just half-idiots.”

“I take that as a compliment.”

“It wasn’t meant to be.”

“I’ve got to go before I puke.”

“Yeah, I’ve got to go before I’m bored to death.”

I stood, left some money on the table, then took my iPad. “See ya.”

“I hope not.”

In my hotel room, I started a pot of coffee, then forgot about it.

Noon came, and still I worked at the computer.

At mid-afternoon, I sat back and folded my arms, staring at the screen.

Wow, 115 pages.

I was suddenly hungry and sleepy. Unable to decide which to do, I poured a cup of tary coffee.

* * * * *

Thursday night. I sat at the cafe table, watching Prija work. I tried to write, but it was nothing more than typing. She was very busy.

My phone played *Johnny B. Goode*. “Hey, Number Three.” I listened. “Yeah, I’m awake. What time is it in L. A.?” After a moment. “About 1:30 a.m. here.” I didn’t really want to talk to him, but we had to get this issue settled. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“I’ve worked out new profit and loss projections,” he said.

“Why?”

“We think we could buy the heavy equipment for the project, then sell it when we’re finished. It would be a lot cheaper than renting or leasing the equipment.”

“We?”

“Number Two and me.”

“But we can write off leasing to reduce our tax obligation.”

“We can amortize the purchases,” Three said.

“No, it won’t work.”

“I’m sending you the P & L projections.”

“Send them,” I raised my voice. “But I’m telling you it won’t work.”

“Problems?” Prija took the chair next to me.

“I gotta go. We’ll talk later.” I tossed my phone to the table.

“Who was that?”

“Business partner,” I said.

“What kind of business?”

“Hospital renovation in Los Angles.”

“Sounds hard.”

“Yeah,” I said, “hard to get everyone on the same page.”

“What page?”

I glanced at my watch; after 2 a.m., I tossed money on the table and grabbed my iPad to leave.

“Why are you spying on me?”

“Actually, I thought I’d get away without seeing you.”

“You’ve been watching me all night.”

“I’ve been working all night.” I held up the computer for her to see.

“I hope it’s not the same twaddle you were writing last night.” She sat at the table, but I didn’t.

“No, this is mostly drivel and tripe.”

“Should be an improvement. Sit down. You look like you’re about to take a runner.”

“I guess it’s too late for that.”

I took the chair across from her. She waved the waitress over.

“So you’re like a voyeur?” She spoke to the waitress. “Hi, Ringy. Can we have two root beers?”

Ringy smiled and went away for the drinks.

“Why are you nice to her?”

“She used to work the street until she got too old.”

“That will happen to you, too. Probably next week.”

“Funny. Why do you come here?”

“I thought I might find intellectual stimulation, but all I get is

boring conversation.”

“Stimulation cost money.”

“But boredom is free?”

“Until I get a paying customer. How about you? Wouldn't you like to buy some real stimulation?”

I laughed. “Why would I do that?”

“Why does any man?”

“Because they can't get a date with a real woman.”

“You don't think I'm a real woman?”

“I think you're a—”

Ringy brought our root beers and set them on the table. Prija sipped her drink, then raised an eyebrow.

“I think there's a time for banter,” I said, “and a time to shut up.”

“Why? Last Saturday night I called you an old American bastard.”

“The truth never hurt anyone.”

“Then tell me the truth about me.”

“All right. You're a beautiful young woman.”

“Blush.”

“And working the street because you can't make the same amount of money in a store or a factory.”

Her phone vibrated. She looked at the message but didn't reply to it.

“Why is Siskit happy working in an export office for a fraction of the money you make?”

“Because I won’t let her work here.”

“Oh, but it’s okay for you?”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“What are you doing?”

She stood. “Going back to work. You can pay for the drinks.”

I watched her walk away, then I left money for Ringy.

I love it. Just like the old days.

* * * * *

It was a little after two on Saturday night. All the tables at the little café were taken. I walked the opposite side of the street. My computer was in a backpack swung over my shoulder.

Prija wasn’t at her usual spot.

I glanced up and down the street; nothing.

Soon, a fat little man emerged from the doorway across the street. Prija followed him out, adjusting her skirt.

“Saxon.”

She yanked me back from some place far away. “Siskit. So good to see you.”

She leaned toward me for a quick hug.

“You watching Prija?”

“Um, yes, I was.”

“Many nights I stand here, watching. I worry some mean drunk will hurt her.”

“Has that happened before?”

“Oh, yes. So many.”

“Why does she do it?”

Siskit waved. Across the street, Prija bobbed her head.

Is she looking at me?

I felt an urge to wave to her but kept a grip on the strap of my backpack.

Had she seen me earlier, watching?

“She give all money to parents. Father has bad cancer. Mother must sit all time in wheel thing.”

“Oh, no. What type of cancer?”

“Lung.”

“Is he on chemo?”

She looked at me. “What is?”

“Um, chemicals they give by IV.” I made a punching motion with my finger to an arm vein. “Or maybe by pills.”

“Oh, yes. He must have all this. Cost is more of 300,000 baht on each month.”

“Radiation?”

“That he have six month back. Now all hair gone.”

“I’m sorry to hear of this.”

“You must not say even one little word to Prija that I told of this.”

“All right.”

Her phone beeped. She read the text, smiled, and clicked a reply. “You promise not tell?” she asked as she looked up at me.

“I promise. But does she not want anyone to know?”

“I only other person who know.”

“Okay. Thank you. This helps me understand.”

“She come to us now.”

I looked across the street to see Prija stop on the sidewalk, waiting for a motorbike to pass, then walk toward us.

“Oh, no. I have to go. Will you come see me later at that little café?”

“Yes, of course. But why you go?”

“Bye for now.”

I had to get away. My emotions ran wild. I loved the banter with Prija, but I didn't want her to know that. And her face, so much like the woman locked away in my memory. And now, the revelation that she sold her body to keep her father alive. All this was overloading my simple brain. Like an expanding balloon too big for the inside of my head. Something had to give way.

If I were a drinking man, a stiff shot of whiskey or vodka would do me good. Maybe two shots of each to numb me into oblivion.

I hated what Prija was doing, but I admired her at the same time. Is love so powerful to drive one to self-devastation? If I were in her place, would I do the same? I don't know if I have the strength of character to perform such a life-altering sacrifice. Her young life being used up for the sake of family.

What would I say to her when next we met? Every verbal jab would be blunted by the image of a woman in a wheelchair at the side of a dying man. Were they aware of what she did to earn the money for them? I doubt it. And what of the drunks and louts who like to hurt women? She put not only her health on the line

every night, but her life as well.

I've known her for less than a week, and already I'm tangled in her life.

I need to get out of Bangkok, tomorrow. I can write from anywhere. Maybe back to the Amazon. Deep in the rainforest, away from the crush of people. Away from cancer and hookers. There, in jungle silence, no distractions, all I need is a satellite link, a bottle of bug repellent, and I can live out my days in peace.

* * * * *

At 3 a.m. I captured a table and ordered dinner so the waitress wouldn't ask me to leave. If Siskit joined me, she could share the food.

It wasn't long before I heard her sweet voice as she came to the table.

What a charming girl she was, and a good sister for Prija.

"I glad you wait for me."

I waved Ringy over. "What will you have to drink?" I pushed the plate of food toward her. "I ordered dinner for us."

"Do you have that orange drink fizz?" she asked Ringy in Thai.

"Oh, yes. You may have the large size. And you, sir, orange fizz?"

"Yes, please."

"I am so hungry," Siskit said.

We chatted in Thai because it was easier for her. I was pleased it came back to me.

She pushed the plate to me. I took a bite.

“What is your profession?” she asked.

“I’m a doctor and a writer.”

“Really? What kind of stories?”

“All kinds. Adventure, history, romance...”

“Have any of your books been translated into Thai?”

“No, all in English.”

“How many books?”

“Sixteen. Four more in the works.” I took another bite and pushed the plate to her. “Enough about me. Do you like your job at the export company?”

“Yes, I love it, but I want to go back to our village in Pattani Province.”

I stopped chewing and stared at her.

“I miss my family.” She pushed the plate back to me. “What?”

I swallowed, then took a drink. “Pattani Province, in the south?”

“Yes. You know of this place?”

“You are Muslim?”

“Yes, Prija, too. We came from a small village.”

“You don’t cover your hair.”

“We’re not devout. We don’t even pray five times a day toward Mecca, unless we’re at home. And then we just go through the motions to please the people there.”

Now I was lost again, overwhelmed. Pattani Province. So many years since I’d heard those two words spoken. That was to

be our destination on my return to Thailand.

“What kind of doctor?”

“What?”

“I wonder what kind of doctor you are.”

“Oh, just a doctor.”

“You said you were here in Bangkok before.” She ate a bite of rice curry.

“Yes.” I held up the empty glass for Ringy to see.

I don’t want to answer these questions. But I can’t be rude to the girl. There’s no reason for that.

“Over fifty years ago.”

“So long, and you remember how to speak our language.”

“When I arrived two weeks ago, I had some trouble, but then it began to come back to me.”

“You speak very well. Why were you here before?”

I turned my glass on the table, watching the condensation pool. “Such a simple question, Siskit. But the answer is so—”

“I thought you left.”

“And here comes Prija,” I said. “Interrupting as usual.”

“Interrupting what?” Prija said as she took a chair and my fresh glass of orange fizz.

“An intellectual conversation with my friend.”

“You have a friend?” She laid her cell phone on the table and smiled at Siskit.

“I stole her from you.” I took my drink from her and sipped.

“I thought you were working?”

“I am working.”

“You won’t make any money goofing off here.”

“I might make money here. From you.”

“Not very freaking likely,” I said.

“He’s a doctor,” Siskit said. “And he has written sixteen books.”

“What kind of doctor?”

“Um...” I took a deep breath and let it go. “Gynecologist,” I said in English.

“What?” Siskit asked.

“A woman doctor.” Prija grinned at me.

“Just drop it, okay?”

Her phone chimed. “Gotta go work.” She stood. “Stay right there till I get back. We’re not finished with this.” She hurried away.

“Oh, my God,” I said. “Sometimes I think I should just keep my mouth shut.”

“Why? You don’t like being a woman doctor?”

“I like it just fine, but Prija is not going to let it go.”

Siskit smiled. “You’re right about that.”

“We were talking about you and your job. Are you in sales?”

“No. My job is logistics.”

“Sounds complicated.”

“Not so much. I use software to route goods to fill containers to the maximum capacity, then assign the containers to be loaded on ships going to America and Europe.”

She explained about using carton dimensions to calculate the most efficient filling of the containers. Then how to assign containers to ships in a particular order so that the ones to be unloaded first were on top of the stack.

“Wow. That’s fascinating. How do you—”

“I have this rash.”

“And she’s back.” I ran my hands down my face. “Monistat, Prija. Get it at the drug store. You don’t need a prescription. Siskit and I were in the middle of a conversation.”

“About me?” She smiled again, third time tonight.

I’ve got to get out of here before I spill the whole ugly story.

“Ladies,” I leaned back in my chair to take money from my pocket, “it’s been fun.” I stood. “I have to go.”

“Why do you have to go?” Siskit asked.

“I need sleep.”

“Tomorrow is Sunday. No one works,” Prija said.

“Some of us have to work every day,” I said.

“On women or books?”

“You’re never going to let this go, are you?”

She shook her head, grinning.

“I’m starting a new book tomorrow.”

“About what?”

“It’s a sad story. You wouldn’t like it.”

“I like to read.”

“You think you can read?”

“I read better than you write.”

“Goodnight, ladies.”

“Be ready tomorrow evening,” Prija said.

“We’re taking you to a nice restaurant,” Siskit said.

I waved over my shoulder as I walked away. I knew they were joking.

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