



# Viper's Tail

## by Tom Crowley

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*For my sister Sal, who always enjoyed a "good read"*

## **Foreshadows**

This is a work of fiction, all names, locations and events are the invention of the author who is solely responsible for the work.

### **1944 : Singapore : Kempeitai Headquarters**

Lieutenant Colonel Masayuki Oishi walked out of his office in the YMCA building on Stamford road and entered the car taking him to the Kempeitai jail in Outram. The Kempeitai were the police of the Imperial Japanese military forces but also had a political function and power similar to the German Gestapo. Oishi had a requisition for able-bodied prisoners to fulfill. The chief of construction on the Thailand section of the Burma railway had asked for 100 prisoners to take the places of those who had died during the railway construction through Kanchanaburi and beyond. Shortly after receiving that message Oishi had received a message from Colonel Suzuki Keiji who supervised the Kempeitai in Southeast Asia. Suzuki had ordered him to add another 20 able-bodied prisoners to the list. These were to be separated at the port in Bangkok and sent to Unit 809 the secret medical research unit in Northern Thailand. Oishi knew what the fate of the prisoners would be but that didn't bother him. They were to be used for the good of the Emperor and the benefit of the Empire. That was all that mattered.

### **1945 : Northern Burma : Thailand Border**

The cold air rushing through the fuselage of the C-47 felt good for a change. Captain Chris Chance had been afraid the months spent in the enervating heat of Sri Lanka and then in Northern India training and preparing for this mission had drained him of all real energy. The

plane bucked to one side and banked back over as the pilot tried to compensate for the updrafts coming off the Tasserine mountain range of Northern Burma and Thailand. They were flying to the East and North of Chiang Mai to avoid the Japanese airbase though there was no expectation that at midnight there would be any night fighters up and about. In fact, they had been briefed that there was little Japanese air opposition left at all but best to be careful.

The insertion was to be a parachute drop. Four men were on the team, Chris, an American Army officer seconded to the OSS, the Office of Strategic Services, Sergeant Sam Banks, an American army explosives expert and two Thai agents or Seri Thai (Free Thai) recruited from colleges in the U.S. and given special warfare training by the OSS.

Chris felt the plane descending a bit and then leveling off. The crew chief walked back and yelled, "Five minutes to jump," at the same time holding up five fingers. Chris nodded and gave him a thumbs up trying to appear calm and in control. He turned to his team to relay the message even though he knew they understood. The English spoken by the Thai men was as good as his if not better. They had been attending Ivy league schools when the war broke out and had plenty of chances to practice military slang in the two years they had been training for this mission. They were eager, as this was homecoming to them. They were hungry for the chance to show the world that the Free Thai were not quietly accepting Japanese occupation and rule. Their primary mission was simple in concept yet Chris was sure it would be complicated in the execution. They were to parachute into the hill tribes area Northeast of Chiang Mai and organize the hill tribes people to carry out guerilla resistance against the Japanese forces in Northern Thailand. The goal was to prepare the ground for the arrival of allied troops, British and American to cross the Salween River and drive on and occupy Chiang Mai. The main goal of the

planned allied advance would be the air base, which would serve as an advance fighter and logistics base for a subsequent drive on the port city of Bangkok. The secondary mission for Chris and one of the Seri Thai was to travel to the East to the Mekong river area along the border with Laos. They were to provide intelligence on the Japanese transportation routes along the river and investigate a reported allied prisoner of war camp in the area.

That was all in the future. Chris's concern now was to have the team hit the drop zone and have no injuries to hold them back. The crew chief turned and held up one finger and yelled, "Stand up, Check up."

Chris stood up, as the stick leader, and turned his back so the number two, Saichon, nicknamed Ton, could check his chute. At the back number four yelled, "Number 4 ready," echoed by number three and two and then Chris yelled to the crew chief, "All ready." Chris shuffled to the open door, holding both sides to steady himself, and looked out into the darkness. He saw a gleam of light reflected from the half moon on the river as it flashed by 800 feet below. They were seconds away. Then the green light came on and the crew chief yelled, "go, go, go."

Chris jumped. The air stream hit him hard and he swung up and back. Too fast. The pilot had been too scared to slow down to drop speed. As he swung back down, the chute popped above him. He twisted under his parachute, looking for the fire which was to mark the landing zone. He saw it to his left. He frantically worked the canopy lines, dipping his parachute to his left and turning towards the fires. He would be short of the landing zone, which wasn't good. It meant he would hit the trees, not the soft open rice paddy on which he wanted to land. He pushed his feet and legs together, not wanting to straddle a tree branch, and pulled his arms in tight. Then he felt the upper branches pulling at him, knocking him sideways and then slowing his

fall until he felt a strong jerk on the canopy and he came to a stop. Hell, he thought, all this training just to get stuck in a tree.

As his bouncing in the parachute harness slowed and he started to get his breath back, he saw it wasn't as bad as he had first feared. The ground was only ten feet below, his equipment bag, on a ten foot line from his harness, was already touching the ground. He released the catch to the chute and, grasping the line to the equipment bag, lowered himself to the ground. As he was unpacking the equipment bag he heard a branch break in the forest behind him and dropped to the ground. Then he heard the metal cricket click. For security reasons his team had adopted the use of a children's toy, a metal cricket, previously used by American airborne soldiers in night drops in Europe. He answered with a snap of his metal cricket and then called "come on up." It was Ton one of the Thai team. He said the rest of the team were gathered on the flat below with the Shan tribesmen who were to guide them. The team had suffered no injuries. They were collecting the explosives, arms and 6 communications equipment dropped in three separate containers. Ton helped Chris secure his equipment bag and parachute and they moved down to join the rest of the team.

The next two weeks went by quickly. The Japanese had no garrisons in the area. This was largely forest, away from the main roads. They were able to travel openly in the day and meet with other villages and secure support. After two weeks Chris felt he could leave Sam Banks and one of the Seri Thai to carry on with the organization of the attack groups in the area. He and Ton could then move on to his second objective, which was a rumored prison camp and Japanese army complex in the forest adjacent to the Mekong River North of Chiang Rai.

One possible scenario for future operations called for Nationalist Chinese troops to come down from Yunnan province in China, no

more than a hundred miles away, and move against the Japanese in Northern Thailand. Headquarters wanted a report on the extent of Japanese troop activity. There were also reports of a prisoner of war (POW) camp in the area. It was important to confirm this, if possible.

### **Japanese army camp, twenty kilometers north of Chiang Rai**

Captain Chris Chance shifted his weight, lying on the ground and leaning forward a bit more into his elbows to steady his grip on the binoculars he was using to study the scene below. They were in the forest rim on the top of a ridgeline that fell away, to a clearing about 50 meters below them. From the clearing the ground sloped down gradually towards the river 50 meters further on. Ton was beside him, both of them sweating from the heat and grateful for the chance to be still and feel the small breeze running along the top of the ridgeline.

The camp in the clearing consisted of several small outbuildings that seemed to be lodging for the troops and the few prisoners he had sighted. The construction was simple wood planks and bamboo with large open areas to let the air flow through. There was a larger central building which was more substantial and a bit more enclosed. That building was the center of activity as the work crew carried boxes from the building down to two boats pulled up at a short pier at the edge of the river. There was no breeze down along the river and a Japanese flag hung limply from the flagpole in the center of the camp.

They were a small work crew, only twelve prisoners, the best of them were shambling skeletons. They wore nothing but loincloths for the most part, a shirt here or a pair of shorts there. Several of the men had the blessed protection of hats. The wooden boxes were heavy, requir-

ing four men to share the strain of carrying them down and loading them into the back of the boat.

It took over an hour as they moved slowly and carefully. Ten Japanese soldiers armed with rifles were shepherding them from the central building down to the boat and back.

After the boat was loaded, they brought out more boxes and loaded them into the back of a truck. When it was half full they were ordered to get into the back of the truck. The truck, followed by another loaded with the Japanese guards, went out of the camp gate along a dirt track that ran parallel to the river. After what seemed like ten minutes of slow bumping along the track, the truck turned off and stopped.

When they disembarked the sergeant in charge of the work crew barked at eight of them, walked them twenty meters off the road, gave them water to drink and shovels, and told them to start digging a trench to bury the boxes. They set to work. The sergeant returned to the rest of the work crew and instructed them to start unloading the boxes and to carry them down alongside the newly dug trench. They moved back and forth until they had stacked the boxes from the truck fully along side the trench.

They crew unloading the truck joined their fellow prisoners who were just finishing the digging of the trench. The sergeant told them all to load the boxes down into the hole. Once all the boxes were down in the hole the sergeant called a halt and gave them water to drink and told them to rest. The prisoners were exhausted. As they slumped down next to the trench, their backs to the sergeant and the guards, one of the prisoners in the trench looked up and yelled a warning, but it was too late. Before they could turn around the bullets started hitting them in the back. The prisoner who had yelled the warning

was hit in the face and upper chest with several rounds. The firing continued for less than a minute. Then silence. The guards came over and shot into the trench at each of the prisoners there to ensure their death. Then the remaining prisoners, whose bodies had dropped at the edge of the trench, were toppled in. After twenty minutes of shoveling dirt into the trench and putting some rocks on top, the work was done. No prisoners would live to tell the story. The guards returned to the truck and drove off.

As the trucks were returning to the camp, the buildings were being set on fire. When the blaze was well underway, an officer ordered the sergeant and his troops into the trucks and they rolled off down the dirt road, past the trench and toward Chiang Rai. The officer and several staff loaded onto the boats and then motored off towards the Mekong.

Chris and Ton were stunned and silent. There was nothing they could have done or could do now. The prisoners were dead. The camp was destroyed. The Japanese were gone. What the purpose of the camp was or why it had so few prisoners, were questions that couldn't be answered now. They would return to the hill tribe camp and make a report. Any investigation would have to be done after the allies drove the Japanese out of Thailand.

### **Manchuko : Japanese occupied Manchuria**

The compound of Manchuko Unit 731 was a bee's nest of activity. Japanese soldiers were running from different directions carrying boxes to the train pulled in at the rail siding serving the camp. Smoke swirled upwards struggling to rise against the humid, rainy season air. Three buildings at the outer edges of the camp had already been set afire.

From his office at the center of the camp, General Ishii Shiro watched dispassionately. He had pulled together all his important papers for shipment and sent out the remainder to be burned. Research Unit 731 was being dismantled. The remaining 150 prisoners being held for use as research subjects had been executed.

The General had enjoyed a rapid rise through the ranks of the Japanese army since his graduation from Kyoto Imperial University Medical School and entry to the army in 1921. The army had strongly supported his interest in biological warfare studies from the very beginning. This camp was the fruition of his years of research and experimentation. Now all evidence of his camp and its existence was to be destroyed. What was considered too valuable to lose was being packed on the train from the Chinese city of Harbin headed back down the Korean peninsula to be carried over to the sacred island, Nippon.

What was too valuable to lose was the research data. General Ishii was determined that his decade of work in Japanese occupied China and Manchuria would not be lost. The trials of plague, cholera, and malaria viruses, the vivisection of the “monkeys”, in reality, Chinese peasants and allied prisoners of war including several downed American airmen unlucky enough to come into his staff’s hands, had all produced interesting and potentially useful results. He felt using human subjects gave much more credibility to his research regardless of any ethical questions. Actually for General Ishii and his staff of medical researchers there were no ethical conflicts. What they were doing was for the Emperor and the Empire. All was justified.

Manchuko Unit 731 was shorthand for the Epidemic Prevention and Water Purification Department of the Kwantung Army. Over 3,000 medical staff were working on projects in research, experiments, an-

ti-epidemic, and water purification and production. The Kempeitai were responsible for providing the prisoners on whom experiments were to be conducted. Beyond vivisection and other forms of tests of infectious diseases on human subjects, the diseases being researched for biological warfare purposes included Cholera, epidemic hemorrhagic fever (EHF) and Plague. The latter was of the greatest interest for use in biological warfare experiments. As the Japanese army was pushed back on all fronts, it was felt important to protect the safety of test results for future use in the defense of the empire. Thousands of test subjects had been killed in the research but more had always been made available through the efficient network of the Kempeitai

It was time to take the results of years of human experiments back home to keep them safe for the empire’s future needs. General Ishii and his colleagues, General Kitano and Colonel Ota would return home to protect the future of this hard earned knowledge.

### **1947 : Sugamo Prison, Tokyo**

As former General Ishii Shiro walked through the gates of Sugamo prison he was a satisfied man. He had successfully negotiated a full pardon and release for himself and his principal deputies in the medical research work of the Kwantung Army. His path in medical research, specializing in biological and chemical warfare, had led him to rapid promotion in the military. Now, with Japan fallen to the Allied Forces, his research had saved him from reprisal for his war crimes. The Americans wanted his research. He had shown himself a much stronger negotiator than the US Army colonels from the US Biological Warfare Center in Ft. Detrick, Maryland. They had initially offered only a reduction in his prison sentence but he had held out, stonewalled them, as the Americans said to him. In the end, with the

Army negotiators receiving General MacArthur's permission, he had won a full release for turning over his unit's research papers. He and his colleagues would be free to continue to serve the Emperor and Japan's imperial interests long into the future.

## **1. Present : Bangkok : Jack's Pool Bar**

Tek Chance was tired, he had started shooting pool in the 9-ball tournament at two in the afternoon and it was now 11 o'clock in the evening. He had played six matches in the two losses and out competition. He had won five, lost one and this was his last chance to get in the money. If he won this match he was sure of third place, if he lost he was out. There was a lot of movement in the pool bar as the hostesses, tottering along on their high heels, hustled drinks to customers while keeping time with the mix of rock music being played on the sound system. It was good rock, 'Dire Straits.' The air in the bar was starting to get a bit thick as many of the players and bystanders were ignoring the local regulations and smoking, including one who had brought along his stash of pot. The bright lights over the tables ensured they were clear but the lighting through the rest of the pool bar was somewhat dim with the exception of the back booth where a card game had started up amongst some of the early pool competition finishers. The card game would go on until sunrise. The window shades would be drawn to block the view of the police outside. Inside, a cop from the local station was one of the players.

Tek was a bit distracted. He had noticed a non-pool player type watching him closely for the last three games of this match. He was sure the guy, a foreigner, was a non-player as the guy had started out standing too close to the tables and someone had to tell him to stand back out of the line of sight of the players while they were shooting. This was a money game, the semi-final, and both Tek and his opponent were on the hill. In pool jargon that means both were just one game short



of winning. The winner of this game would win the match. Tek had a difficult shot on the 9 ball to finish. He could play safe and hope for another chance to shoot. The hell with it, attack and win, right? He tried the shot, an almost 90 degree cut into the corner pocket, and for a second he thought he had it, as the 9 ball hit the pocket edge but then it bounced to the other edge of the pocket and hung there, easy pickings for his opponent. Tek didn't concede the shot to his opponent. He just didn't believe in conceding, at most anything. His opponent knocked the ball down and came over to shake Tek's hand.

"Good match," he said. "You could have played safe on that last shot. That was a tough cut."

"Yeah, maybe some day I'll learn not to go for every shot. Good luck in the next match."

Tek disassembled his cues, ready to call it a night. Then the stranger approached him. He was well over six feet tall with a blockish build, not fat just on the wide side with muscle, and military cut blond hair. He was dressed too uniform for a tourist, khaki slacks, black loafers and a short-sleeved blue shirt with a button down collar. He looks government, Tek thought.

"Great shooting, just a bit of bad luck."

"Thanks," Tek said, "but you make your own luck." I just plain missed the shot. Are you visiting Bangkok?"

The man held out his hand and said, "Mr. Chance, my name is Jim Aspen. A mutual friend, Carl Winters, said to look you up. He thought you might be able to help me out with something."

Tek stepped back and looked at the man more closely. This was not a casual visit. Carl was his best buddy from his ranger days in Iraq and Afghanistan. Carl was working in an anti-terrorism role with the government now. He wouldn't send a casual visitor. This must be government business of some sort and Tek really didn't want it, but the guy had used Carl's name. That meant a lot. Tek shook his hand and nodded toward the door, away from the throng of pool players, night people and bar workers.

"How did you know to come here, to Jack's?"

"Carl told me. Said it was like your second office and, as my business was urgent, he told me to check here first."

Tek had an office in the Emporium building on Sukhumvit road in central Bangkok. It was modern in appearance, all glass and gray and black metal, overlooking a park. His mother had insisted on it after his separation from the American military and return to Thailand. She had the real estate connections, as part owner of the building, to get a bargain deal for the space and told Tek it was a matter of family face. She couldn't have him working out of his home or a pool bar. Tek had gone along to keep mom happy. But, beyond checking in for an hour or two daily when he was in town, he didn't spend a whole lot of time there.

"Did Carl have any special message for me?"

Jim smiled, "He said to ask you how Tex was doing."

For Tek that was the recognition code. When he had gone into the military few of his instructors could handle the name Tek. Maybe it just seemed too foreign. The result was that, early on, one of his

instructors started calling him Tex and the nickname had stuck with him through his time in the military. He and Carl had agreed to use it as a recognition code if Carl needed to get in touch with him through a third party.

Tek nodded. "Tex is doing ok. I take it you want to talk. Let me put my cues in the locker. We should find a quieter place. Do you have an idea where we should go?"

"Yeah, if you don't mind we can go back to my hotel, the Hyatt. The lower floor has some traffic going to the nightclub but there is no one at the bakery nearby the nightclub as it's closed now. It's quiet there."

A light rain was falling as they walked down the dark alleyway outside Jacks to the street. The high-rise Sheraton hotel towered over them fifty meters off to the side. The light from over the tables of the pool bar reflected through the glass front of Jack's bar off pools of standing water in the alley. A young woman, coming to visit her friends inside Jacks, stopped and performed a wai towards the spirit house guarding the entrance. A working girl, Tek thought, probably praying for a customer to pay her way for the night. Despite the rain, the street was full of empty taxis with their red meter lights on, jostling along the road looking for customers, and they were able to wave one down immediately. They rode to the hotel together in the taxi making small talk.

Tek noted this taxi was a nest of Buddha statues, at least six small statues on the dashboard (under glass) and a larger one, looking forward, as well as the images of two monks, famous for their moral strength, hanging from the rearview mirror. It would be a safe trip.

Jim mentioned it was his first visit to Thailand. He had arrived a day earlier and said he was here for a week or two. Tek took that to mean

however long it took until his unnamed business got done.

This late at night there was little traffic so the ride from Jack's pool bar on Asoke road to the Erawan corner area on Rajadamri road took only ten minutes. Tek had the taxi stop before the intersection, outside the nearby McDonalds, and showed the government man the back way into the Hyatt. His thinking was that he wasn't sure if this was intended to be clandestine business or not but it seemed best to remain inconspicuous right from the beginning.

In the lower level of the hotel they took a couple of chairs at tables near the closed bakery outlet. No one was around though the nightclub across the floor was starting to fill up with customers. The night was just starting to peak for the night clubbers. There was a glass wall around the club and they could feel the thumping of the bass from the imported hip hop band and see the bar and dance floor dotted with foreign businessmen and young Thai women dancing and talking. Their shadows danced through the glass front of the club and across the floor to the dimly lit area where Tek and the government man were seated. A hotel security guard came by, looked at them, decided not to bother a foreign customer, and walked away.

Tek sat and looked at the government man, as he thought of him now, and wondered, thinking to himself, what the hell was Carl doing? He knows I won't get involved in agency business.

"Well, Jim, I have to warn you. You used Carl's name, so I feel I have to talk with you but I am just not interested in the work he is doing nowadays. First I have a question for you. How do you come to know Carl so well that he would direct you to me?"

"I know him from the same place you do, the Army in Afghanistan. I was one of the doctors who worked on Carl after he was wounded. I

followed up and saw him again several times during his stay at Walter Reed and his separation from the service. We became friends. My current work for the government is in medical research in Atlanta. When I found myself needing some advice and help on matters Asian and Thai I went to Carl. He recommended you.”

“Fine, but I am still not interested in Carl’s line of work. He is a good man working with a bunch of liars and double-dealers.”

“Tek, may I call you that?” Tek nodded okay. “I can say, at least as far as we know right now, this isn’t CIA business and not in Carl’s scope of work. My current efforts are in a completely different area, medical research. Right now, for all we know, this matter may not even be in the U.S. government’s area of interest. That is one of the things, I am here to look into”

“What is it then?”

“There was an American tourist who disappeared up north, outside of Chiang Rai, a few days ago. Possibly you saw something in the newspaper.”

“Yeah,” Tek said, “apparently he went off hiking by himself and never returned.”

“Well, he is a very important researcher at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the CDC. I also work at the CDC and that’s the report the CDC got. However, there are some circumstances involved here that have raised some concerns in the U.S., so it was decided it should be looked into a bit more thoroughly. I was nominated for the job.”

“That’s fine,” Tek responded, “but why the trip? Just tell the embassy staff to go up and check further.”

The government man coughed and looked at the floor for a moment. “Let’s just say there are some complications and sensitive possibilities vis-à-vis the Thai government. It was decided that we couldn’t be officially opening this up through the embassy without calling the attention of the Thai government to it and we would rather not do that at this time.”

“If it’s not feasible to bring the Thai government in, why is it feasible to bring this to me? I guess you know I act as an advisor to the government, the parks and wildlife department under the Ministry of Environment as well as the forestry people. My work is pretty much limited to helping to train park rangers and assist with wildlife and forest conservation matters. Its not a security position at all.”

“Yes, but you also still hold a U.S. passport and up until two years ago had top operational security clearances from the U.S. government. Your combat awards, the Purple Heart medal and medals for valor in Iraq and Afghanistan, give you street cred as they say. Also you have a great advantage in being considered local by the Thai government and provincial officials you meet when traveling in the countryside.”

Tek laughed, “Also being mixed blood Western and Thai, or Luk Krung as the Thai say, I will not be as noticeable as a blond haired American walking around asking questions.”

The government man smiled, possibly in appreciation at Tek’s laying the cards on the table for him. “Yes, there is that too. Please hear me out.”

The government man explained that the subject who had disappeared in the north of Thailand, Dr. Tim Snow, was a colleague. They both worked for the CDC, out of Atlanta, Georgia. The missing man had finished some official business in Hong Kong and had scheduled some personal time to tour in Thailand before returning back to the U. S. That was the last anyone in official channels had heard from him. The sensitive issue was that the man was cleared for the highest level of security work in the area of communicable diseases especially as it applied to foreign origin viruses.

“Okay” Tek said, “but what do you want from me? I’m not a detective.”

“But you do know your way around Thailand and specifically the jungle. We understand that you are periodically traveling into and spending time in forest and jungle areas throughout the country. It wouldn’t seem unusual for you to be banging through the woods in the area north of Chiang Rai where this man disappeared. Certainly, if you are on the scene, it would be normal to ask questions about what happened to the foreigner.”

“What if I come up with nothing?”

“Then we have nothing. But it’s nothing that has been checked out. We can’t close the file until we know for sure what has happened but it would be an important step in that direction.”

“Let me think on it. How do I get in touch with you?”

The government man handed Tek a mobile phone. “It’s better, unless absolutely required, if we don’t meet again to keep from calling attention to what you are doing. This is an unregistered phone. Just call or send me an sms if things get complicated. We can go day by

day. When we finish I will send you an email address to which you can send a report. You sms me an account number and a bank, any country, and we will pay your expenses and fees, government rate I’m afraid, into that account.”

Tek stood up, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was falling into a trap of some sort but he couldn’t see it yet. “Ok, let me sleep on it and I will answer you tomorrow. If I go, I will leave after I wrap up some things here in the morning. Possibly I’ll go up tomorrow afternoon”.

“Thanks. This is important. We really appreciate it”.

They shook hands and Jim left, heading up the lower lobby stairs to the main lobby. Tek sat back down to take a second to organize his thoughts. He felt a bit queasy about all of this. The pieces he had been given didn’t quite add up. It wasn’t what he was told, as always it was what he wasn’t told. If the missing guy was really that important why wasn’t the embassy in on this? Why weren’t the Thai government security people involved? He trusted Carl with his life, indeed had done so many times, but this was not as straight forward as the government man was trying to make it seem.

As he was thinking these things over, four women came walking down the stairs going in the direction of the nightclub. One stopped, and looked over at Tek. Then she called to him “Hey you.”

Tek looked, saw who it was, smiled, and responded, “Hey you back.” It was Noi, his only girl. They had been circling each other for over six months, both interested and yet both wary of getting too close. After making several dating mistakes on his return to Thailand, with what he termed Bangkok beauty queens in their mid twenties, Tek had met

Noi while rock climbing in the Krabi area of Southern Thailand. She was thirtyish, very attractive but definitely not a beauty queen in that she didn't seem to mind being exposed to the sun or salt water and could handle climbing and laying ropes on the rock face as well as many men. His constant travel to forest areas kept them apart but she had no problem with it, only telling him to call when he could.

Noi separated from her girlfriends, waving them on into the nightclub. She didn't look outdoorsy tonight. She wore a simple black cocktail dress, cut above the knees, with a snug v bodice showing a moderate amount of breast. Walking over to Tek, she said, "It's good to see you. Are you busy?"

"No, I was just bringing an overseas visitor back to the hotel. How about you?"

"The girls wanted to make a last stop for the night. I'm just tagging along. Got a better idea?" She knew Tek had no interest in stepping inside the nightclub. It just wasn't his scene.

"Well, I'm a bit hungry. Want to go see if we can find a bowl of noodles in the neighborhood?" One of the things Tek liked about Noi was that she wouldn't stand on ceremony as far as dress was concerned. Many women wearing a cocktail dress would protest that they were overdressed to sit at a street side table eating noodles. Not Noi.

In reply, Noi turned and waved at her girl friends who were watching through the windows from inside the nightclub. She gave them a thumbs up, letting them know she was going with Tek. They all laughed and waved back. One gave them the V sign.

## 2. Chiang Rai

Yoshi Moriumi was hot and tired and wished he was back in Osaka with the string of bar girls and nightclubs he managed for the big boss. Thailand, with its rampant sex industry, enormous drug industry and corruption throughout, had attracted the yakuza since the 1950s. Illicit activities, tied to organized crime, accounted for up to 20 % of Thai GDP by some accounts. This was a wonderland for the yakuza. Every major syndicate in Japan was present here as was every major crime. This was the perfect setting for the special project he had been sent to check on. He had been in on the beginning of the project and the bosses felt he was the best one to oversee any problems that came up.

Normally a trip to Thailand would have made him the envy of his brothers in the Osaka gang, but not this one. There was to be no pleasant stop to visit the gang club in Thaniya Plaza in Bangkok, or time to catch a day or two on the golf course. He had been given three hours notice to catch the plane in Osaka then had to rush straight through the Bangkok airport and catch a connection to Chiang Rai. Now he was to meet with the gang's local rep who would brief him before making a trip to the work complex in the jungle.

This man, a fellow yakuza Yoshi knew from Osaka, and two younger members of the local organization met him at the airport and took him to the hotel. They had booked him into a luxury hotel, the Dusit Island Resort. He appreciated that though he would spend little time there. The local man had already checked into the room for him as well. As he followed the bellboy up to the suite he thought, at least this was

going well. He was being shown a bit of the respect he deserved. After all, his family had over a seventy-year history in the organization. His grandfather had been an associate, however minor, of Toyama Mitsuru, the legendary founder of the Black Dragon Society, the first and foremost of the ultra-right wing patriotic societies formed before the Russo Japanese war in 1905. The yakuza, self-styled latter day samurai in their various gangs, had been the strong arm of these societies from the very beginning. Yoshi's family had been involved from the very beginning to the present day. He thought of himself as part of a warrior aristocracy and, in the world of the Japanese gangster, he was.

After thirty minutes to clean up and unpack he went down to the front of the hotel. There was a car waiting to take him to meet again with the local rep, Kenji, an Osaka gang member serving out several years in exile after killing an uncooperative politician in Southern Japan. This had made him too hot for the local scene and forced the gang to take him out of Japan until official memories faded.

The ride to a villa on the outskirts of town took twenty minutes. Kenji was waiting for him on the front porch, which was shielded with mosquito screens and filled with green plants. Most of the plants were hanging orchids that Yoshi appreciated. That his host was waiting outside for him was another sign of respect that he appreciated. Kenji, though younger, was close to his same age and, apart from the fact that Yoshi was visiting from the head office, had no obligation to defer to him. Yoshi thought possibly it was an eagerness on Kenji's part to have his exile end as soon as possible that brought on this good behavior. In any case, he noted it.

Kenji took him to a side room that had a small table fitted into a sunken floor, much as a private room in a Japanese restaurant, allowing them to sit on cushions on the floor with their feet under the

table. The room was somewhat Spartan in its lack of furnishings. The surfaces of the walls were decorated with bamboo and hangings of Japanese nature prints. A small water fountain gurgled softly in the corner. It seemed Kenji, longing for home, was trying to construct a bit of Japan in this remote corner of Thailand. After sitting and receiving the obligatory cup of tea, Yoshi decided to move quickly to the subject, "What went wrong? Why was this foreigner killed?" he asked.

Kenji paused, looking down for a moment and then said, "Our Thai friends are responsible for what went wrong. The men who did this were our contractor's men handling the drugs. Not our men. The foreigner was walking along the back road through the forest and stumbled across the contractor's group loading a drug shipment onto a pickup truck. The fools convinced themselves they were going to be exposed by a US drug agent and that the only option was to silence him. He wasn't shot, rather they beat him to death when he tried to run away while they were questioning him about his presence. The man never got near to the camp."

"Well, what is the truth? Was this man an American drug agent?"

"It's not clear. He maintained he was not. He was supposedly in Thailand as a tourist after a work visit in Hong Kong. He was carrying an official passport but had no identification that linked him with any drug or security agencies."

"This is regrettable. What did they do with the body?"

"We had a lucky break. There is a forest clearing some distance away where the park rangers had recently built some small cabins in which they could spend nights while patrolling for poachers. Somehow this enraged the local elephant herd and they came through and broke up

most of the huts. Our local crew left the body there making it look as if the tourist had stumbled upon the elephant herd and the elephants had attacked him. The contractor's crew phoned in an anonymous tip to the rangers about seeing a farang, a foreigner, walking in the forest nearby. Rangers looking for the tourist soon discovered the body. We have been told they are taking the approach that the elephant herd was responsible in the report they are making now."

Yoshi just grunted, not willing to signify that what had been done was either good or bad. Time would tell. "What about the shipments, did they both go off in their respective directions?"

"One did. The load of shabu was taken down to the river and south by boat and then overland to the port at Laem Chabang. That shipment went off immediately. That was what was being loaded when the foreigner stumbled upon them. The shipment of special materials up river to China is being delayed until we make sure of who and what the foreigner was. I have cleared the scientists working on the shipment off the site. Once they return it will take a week or ten days processing the materials to have the shipment ready to go. These are very dangerous substances."

"How about the contractor's men responsible for this mess? Has any action been taken with them?"

"Not yet. I thought it best to keep them off guard and quiet for now. We can punish them later."

Yoshi sat back and thought, deliberately taking time to let Kenji squirm a bit, impressing on him, through this process, who was the boss. Finally, Yoshi heaved a sigh. "This incident is regrettable. Our security must be tighter, but the witness has been eliminated and one

shipment is gone. Let's stand down activity on this site for a while, get the contractor's men out of here and have our security men just keep an eye on things and await developments. Make sure our friends with the forest rangers get the word to post the area as closed. No one enters, Thai or foreign. Tell them to use the danger from the elephants as an excuse if anyone protests." Kenji nodded in acceptance.

Yoshi again took time before speaking further and then said, "If there are no further intrusions, we will make payment and send off the second shipment when we are sure of things. This is a critical phase of the program. It cannot be allowed to go wrong."

For the first time during the discussion Kenji showed a faint smile. "I gave the orders for the site to be vacated already. Currently all the staff are standing down awaiting our word to start up again except for some of our men watching the site area to keep it secure and two men in contact with the park rangers to monitor their activities. Possibly tomorrow you would have time for some golf while we wait for developments?"

Yoshi allowed himself a laugh. "That's the only good thing I have heard today. Let's plan on it, and let's keep a close eye on the site, the forest department rangers and any other foreigners who may be looking around. Maybe this is a coincidence and maybe . . ." He let the sentence trail off not wanting to speak the unspeakable. Things had gone so smoothly with the special operation so far. This operation was very important to his superiors in the gang and their right wing political connections. He would not want to be the one whose name was associated with its discovery or disruption.