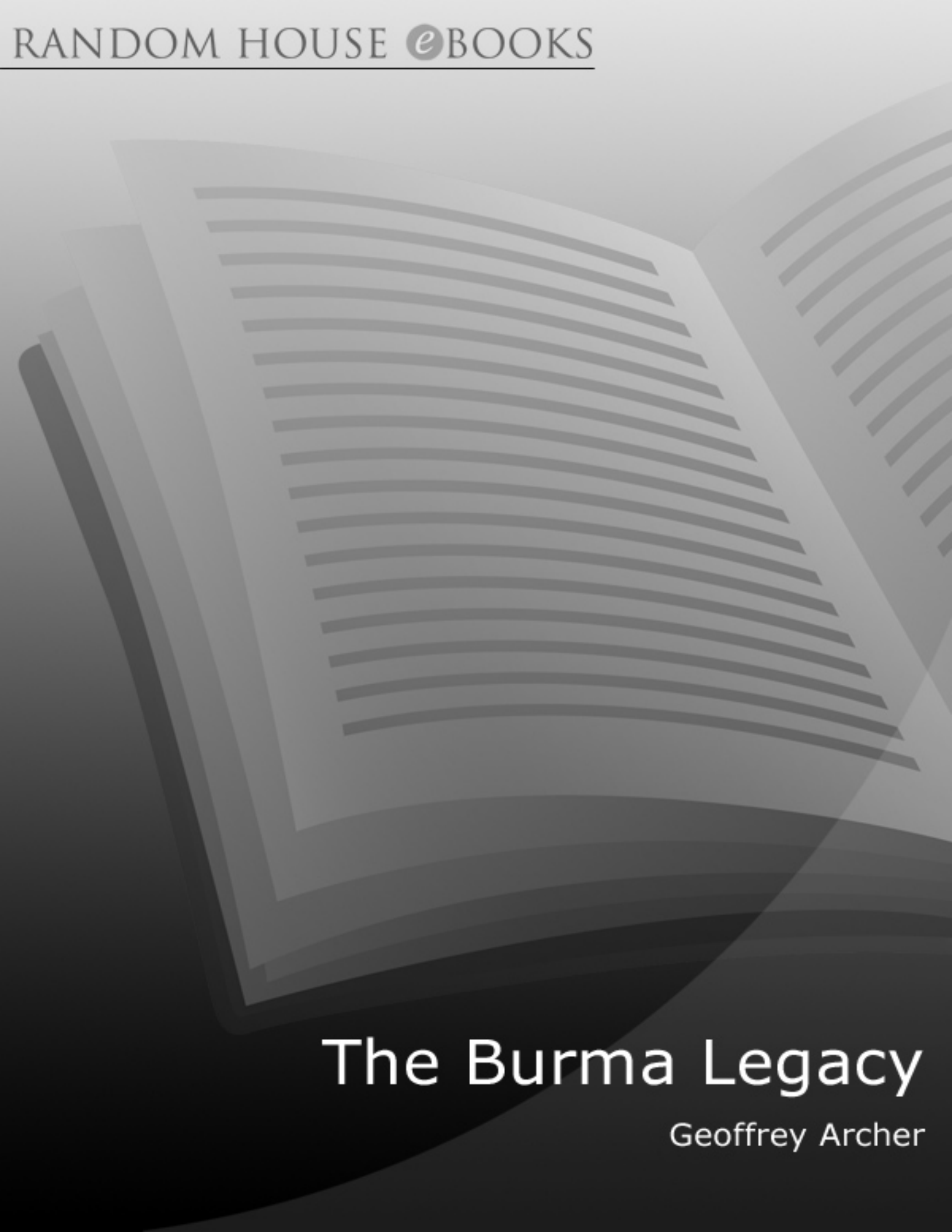


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Burma Legacy

Geoffrey Archer

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About the Book

Fifty-five years after the end of World War Two, Tetsuo Kamata is a wealthy businessman, but he was once an interrogator in a Japanese Prisoner of War camp. One of his victims, Peregrine Harrison, recognizes him. Harrison never got over his maltreatment at Kamata's hands and has dreamed of killing him ever since. Now he has his chance.

But if Kamata dies, so do the livelihoods of hundreds of car factory workers. MI6 officer Sam Packer is diverted from his hunt for an ex-SAS drug trader in Thailand and given the order to stop Harrison. The search takes him deep into Harrison's past and to the poppy fields of the Golden Triangle. To save Kamata from execution Packer must penetrate an alien and hostile world, a quest which brings him face to face with the very drug lords who have sworn to kill him.

About the Author

Geoffrey Archer's gripping thrillers are inspired by a deep knowledge of international intrigue gathered during more than 25 years of reporting for ITV's News at Ten. *The Burma Legacy* is the third novel featuring MI6 agent Sam Packer, who first appeared in *Fire Hawk* and *The Lucifer Network*. It follows his other international bestsellers: *Java Spider*, *Scorpion Trail*, *Eagle Trap*, *Shadow Hunter* and *Sky Dancer*.

ALSO BY GEOFFREY ARCHER

Sky Dancer
Shadow Hunter
Eagle Trap
Scorpion Trail
Java Spider
Fire Hawk
The Lucifer Network
Dark Angel

THE BURMA LEGACY

Geoffrey Archer



arrow books

To Eva, Alison and James.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to several authors whose books helped me to understand present day Myanmar and the Burma of the past.

Aung San Suu Kyi's *Letters from Burma*, Rory Maclean's *Under the Dragon*, and Shelby Tucker's *Among Insurgents* provided potent illustrations of life under military rule in the 1990s.

Richard Rhodes James' *Chindit*, Philip Stibbe's *Return Via Rangoon*, George Macdonald Fraser's *Quartered Safe Out Here*, Eric Lomax's *The Railway Man* and Theodore F. Cook's *Japan at War - An Oral History* all, in their different ways, revealed the suffering of those who fought the Second World War in Burma.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to the Burma Star Association and to Arthur Titherington for sharing his painful memories of being a prisoner of the Japanese. Sincere thanks too to Martin Smith for his invaluable advice and assistance prior to my research visit to Myanmar.

One

The Andaman Sea, Thailand Thursday, 30 December 1999

A gleaming motor cruiser carved a white scar across the vivid blue sea, its throttles wide open. The man and woman on the bridge gripped the grab-handles as it hammered through the curling wake of a white-hulled ferry on passage from Phuket to the paradise islands of Phi-Phi. Scanning the ship's decks through binoculars they saw passengers watching them with envy. But the image the tourists had of them – a relaxed, well-off couple enjoying a vacation in the privacy of their own boat – was a lie. This was no pleasure cruise.

The real name of the bare-chested man at the wheel was Sam Packer, but his business card described him as Stephen Maxwell, a Singapore-based investment adviser. In reality he worked for British Intelligence. Beside him, wearing a yellow bikini, was Inspector Midge Adams – cover name Beth – a narcotics officer with the Australian Federal Police. They'd met for the first time that morning and were still wary of each other.

After a day of searching, they'd finally located their quarry, but the man they were after was an hour away from them. Fearing he might move on before they had the chance to catch up, they were squeezing every ounce of speed from their craft.

Their target was a man called Jimmy Squires, a former sergeant in the SAS, who'd turned to narcotics trading

after leaving the Queen's employ. It was the Australians who were leading the operation to catch him – the market he served was in their backyard, the druggie hangouts of Sydney and Melbourne. MI6's offer to help put Squires out of business was in part the returning of a favour owed to the Australian Federal Police, but it was also to do with national pride. The SAS, the jewel in the UK's military crown, had a reputation to maintain. If one of its dogs went feral, the beast had to be culled.

Packer had been scrambled to Phuket that morning. Only when he landed in Thailand had he discovered the 'Inspector Adams' he was to work with was a female. And despite her petite shape, attractive blond hair and dark brown eyes, he hadn't welcomed the arrangement. The last time he'd worked closely with a woman, she'd nearly got him killed.

The Australians lacked the evidence they needed to put Jimmy Squires behind bars. The purpose of *this* operation was to find some. Cash was the key. If they could trace its passage from the addicts back to the supplier, Midge Adams would have her case. The usually effective, electronic systems for money tracking had failed to come up with the goods, so now they were trying the direct approach. Hoping to trick Squires into telling them where he banked his loot.

The scheme was entirely Midge Adams' idea. Packer considered it dangerously naïve and almost bound to fail. In the few hours he'd spent with her, he'd been troubled by the intensity with which she talked about the drug-runner. He suspected a personal motive behind her need to nail the man. And when self-interest intruded in a case, mistakes tended to follow.

The Andaman Sea shimmered in the relentless December sunlight. A bimini over the bridge protected them from its afternoon heat. The area they were powering through was a playground of turquoise waters and white

sand beaches, which drew millions of tourists a year escaping from cold northern winters.

Packer altered course a few degrees to avoid a long-tail skiff which was slicing through the waters towards them, its slender lines at odds with the lumpy V-8 engine thundering away on its steering pole. The Thai boatman had two Europeans as fares. He nursed his craft through the waves, helming it towards some dream island, with the panache of a gondolier.

'You married, Steve?' Midge had spoken little in the last hour. Her accent was broad and she eyed him from behind dark glasses. Steve. From the moment they'd met she'd been meticulous about using cover names.

'No, Beth. I'm not.'

'Partner? Live with someone?'

He half smiled. 'Getting personal all of a sudden ...'

'Always like to know the score.'

'Well, for the record, I have a girlfriend back in London.'

She stared ahead again. 'But you're living in Singapore.'

'That's right.'

'Tricky. What's her name?'

'Julie.'

'Ever see each other?'

'Not often enough.'

A few days ago Julie had threatened to give up on him unless he relocated to London soon.

'Offering to fill the gap?' he asked.

'Tcchh!' She turned away, opened a bottle of sun cream and started applying it to her shoulders.

'What about you?'

'I live with someone in Sydney.' It was a woman she rented a room to, but she wasn't going to tell him that.

'Can I help?' He pointed at the bottle.

'No thanks.' She gave him an old-fashioned look. 'And, just for the record - and since my assessment of the accommodation arrangements on this little ship tells me

we'll be sharing a bed tonight – when I work with guys it's strictly no touching. Under *any* circumstances. Okay?'

'Just trying to be helpful.'

'Yeah, well, as my old granny used to say, give a man an inch and he'll stick the rest in.'

Sam smiled. 'Some granny.'

'Opened beer bottles with her teeth.'

He laughed. '*That* you're making up.'

Midge pulled a tense smile. It was the first one he'd seen on her. And it was an improvement.

Sam Packer's knowledge of the Golden Triangle heroin trade had been superficial until this morning – his normal focus being the profits from arms, not drugs. Midge had briskly filled him in on the ethnic-Chinese Wa tribes who controlled the Shan border area of Myanmar – formerly Burma – shipping heroin through China and Thailand to the wider world. And in particular she'd told him about a man called Yang Lai whose distribution network they suspected Jimmy Squires was attached to. Suspected. That was the problem with the Australians' case. They had nothing strong enough to convince a jury.

The event a couple of days ago which had triggered this attempt at entrapment was the opening of a small suitcase containing wads of cash. The yacht broker in Phuket, who'd received the \$280,000 in payment for a luxury powerboat, had tipped off Thai Customs and they'd called the Royal Thai Police money laundering squad. The cash itself had proved clean, but when the name of the boat purchaser – Vincent Gallagher – was fed into a database at the Narcotics Suppression Bureau, it had come up as a pseudonym used by Jimmy Squires.

The sun disappeared behind a line of cloud, turning the sea slate-grey. As they raced towards the main island of Phuket, the water had become less open. Dark humps dotted the surface now, limestone outcrops jutting from the water like thumbs, and longer, flatter islands of finely

ground coral where night fishermen had bamboo huts under the coconut palms for sleeping in during the day.

'Tell me,' Sam probed, 'the name Midge - is that on your birth certificate?'

'No way. And I never let on what is.'

'So how come you're called that?'

'Because when I was little, I was small for my age. And nasty with it. Anybody got in my way, I bit them.'

'Charming ...' He pursed his lips. 'Grown out of the habit I hope.'

'Don't bank on it.'

She leaned over the chart. There was a warm, oily smell to her, which Packer found irritatingly arousing.

'Where are we?'

He touched a finger to the paper.

'This the fastest we can go?'

'Yep.'

'How fast's Jimmy's boat?'

'No idea.'

They'd picked up the chartered craft from the same marina Squires had motored from the day before. Midge had confessed that although she spent a lot of time *in* water back home, being on top of it was alien to her. Sam had given her some basic instruction in crewing.

She leaned back in the white leather seat beside him, placing her feet on the rail. Nice feet, Sam noticed. Slender and straight-toed.

'Your boss wasn't lying when he said you liked boats,' she commented. 'I've been watching you.'

'Wanting to be sure you were in safe hands?' He glanced sideways at her and raised an eyebrow.

'Something like that.'

'Sailing's my thing, not power.'

'You own a yacht?'

'Used to have a fifty per cent share. But I had to sell it. Work. You know ...'

'Never leaves you time for the things you want to do. Would you do more of it, if you could? Big time cruising, that sort of thing.'

'Like a shot.'

'What has to happen to make it more than a dream?'

'Enough money, enough time and the right woman to crew for me.'

'Julie ...?'

Sam shrugged, not wanting to get into that again. 'Tell me about Jimmy Squires. Everything you haven't already told me.'

She looked away, staring at the horizon. 'Oh, he's straight out of a casebook. A boy who never knew his father. Brought up in an orphanage, then by foster parents. A right tearaway when he was a teenager. The file said he created a one-man juvenile crime wave in his home town.'

'Where was that?' The background file Packer's own employer had provided had been woefully sparse.

'Somewhere called Ripley? Yorkshire, I think. He did car theft, vandalism. The usual. Then some kindly probation officer steered him into the army to keep him out of jail. He was a tough nut, but they found he was bright too. Demonstrated a readiness to kill and a talent for survival. A shoe-in for special forces, I guess. But then he turned bad.'

'And bought a quarter-million-dollar ego-trip with the proceeds.'

'Amongst other things.'

It'd be a bloody great stamp in the passport, Sam realised. Barnado's boy makes good. An 'up yours' to every bugger who'd ever tried to put him down. The question was whether he'd be stupid enough to brag about it when they caught up with him. *If they did ...*

'Remind me - when did he leave the SAS?'

'Two years ago when he turned forty. Been in uniform since the age of seventeen. His marriage broke up a year before that.'

'SAS men don't get home that often.'

'Then you and him'll have something to talk about ...'

'Thanks.' He didn't need reminding. His affair with Julie had been relatively new when he was posted to Singapore nearly a year ago. Going three months. And he'd only seen her twice since then.

He asked Midge what had brought Squires to this part of the world.

'The Thai military recruited him - they were looking for men with jungle experience to show Karens living near the border how to spy on drug caravans.'

'Why bother with Brits? They must have dozens of their own who could do that.'

'One reason was historical. The Karens fought with the Brits against the Japs in World War Two and still have a high regard for them. The other, would you believe it, was *integrity*.' Midge's voice was heavy with irony. 'They thought SAS men were incorruptible.'

'Christ. How many did they hire?'

'Two. The other guy alerted the Thais to the fact that Squires wasn't playing by the rules anymore.' She shook her head in amazement. 'I thought those fellers were loyal to each other unto death.'

'Shows you haven't read the books they write. How did you lot get involved?'

'When the Thai's Narcotics Suppression Bureau put a watch on Squires, they logged frequent trips to Australia. So they alerted us. We put him under surveillance in Sydney and Melbourne, but the bastard was too good. Gave our watchers the slip. However ... by some remarkable coincidence his visits always seemed to be followed by an influx of Burmese heroin.'

Sam glanced to port. The sea was dotted with pleasure craft now. He looked enviously at a yacht under full sail. Midge noticed.

'More your style?'

He nodded. They were nearing a large land mass.

'Phuket island?' Midge asked, pointing.

'S'right.'

She leaned forward, moving a finger up the chart. 'The marina's here, right?'

'You've got it.'

A Thai narcotics officer on the quayside had radioed thirty minutes before to say that Squires' boat the *Estelle* was coming in to have a dodgy water pump replaced. A tip-off they'd desperately needed. Until then, they'd spent the day rushing from one sun-baked anchorage to another in a fruitless search for him.

Suddenly a beep shrilled from the console in front of them.

'Shit!'

'What's that?'

Sam grabbed the throttles and yanked them back to neutral.

'Oil pressure.' He pointed to the gauge. The needle had sunk to zero.

'What's that mean?'

'Don't know, yet.' He pulled the stop button and the engine died.

'For Christ's sake, Steve! What're you doing? We've got to get to that marina.'

'No oil, no can do.' He spun from his seat, slid down the companionway steps and stomped into the saloon. Before leaving harbour that morning he'd been given the briefest of tours of the boat's machinery space. He unclipped the engine covers and peered inside.

Midge followed him down. When she reached him he was reading the dipstick.

'Bone dry.' He opened the spares locker. 'But we're in luck! There's a five-litre can here.'

'They forgot to top up before we took the boat?'

‘Or else there’s a leak.’ He leaned into the engine space again. There were black oil smears down the engine block. ‘Could be that the rocker cover wasn’t screwed down properly.’

‘Meaning ...?’

‘That I might be able to fix it with a spanner.’ He looked in the locker, found a large, long-handled wrench and applied it to the loose securing bolts. ‘Better get back on deck and keep watch. Make sure nothing runs us down.’

He poured the fresh oil into the engine, cleaned up and restarted the diesel, checking there were no more leaks. Soon they were on their way again.

‘Fix you a drink, skipper?’ Midge asked, her eyes betraying a trace of admiration.

‘I could murder a mug of tea.’

She headed down to the galley.

Fifteen minutes later there was a further message from the marina. The *Estelle* had called to say she’d be alongside at four-thirty.

Sam smiled with satisfaction. ‘We’ll only be twenty minutes behind him.’

‘Well, well, well,’ said Midge. ‘Perhaps there *is* a God.’

Ten minutes later they arrived at a guano-smeared post marking the entrance to the channel which led through mangrove clumps to the marina. The water here was like brown soup. Sam reduced speed to a point not far above the 5 knots allowed. Midge sat tensely beside him, as more long-tail boats sliced past, their fisherman owners waving giant prawns in the hope of a sale.

The channel narrowed. Ahead, the river was flanked by mangrove roots as spindly as spider-legs. Then, round a bend, the concrete harbour entrance came in view, just as the police radio crackled one more time.

‘Estelle in berth B23. If you quick, you take the space next.’

‘Okay,’ Sam grimaced. ‘Let the performance begin.’ Uneasily he watched Midge pick her way to the bow and cleat on a line in the way he’d shown her earlier in the day. Her hair was bunched in a pony tail and as she moved about, it flicked from side to side. She’d pulled on a clingy, low-cut tee-shirt over her bikini top.

The sinking sun had burned a hole through the clouds. Sam squinted into it to identify the marker posts at the ends of the pontoons. Spotting the one for row B, he saw the *Estelle* six slots up, the name in big gold letters across her broad stern. Two males were on deck, busy with ropes. Two women lounged in chairs on the aft sun deck. Sam swung the boat into the row, cut the revs and turned into the empty berth alongside.

‘Port side to, Beth.’

Midge looked baffled.

‘Left side alongside,’ Sam explained.

She moved to the rail with the bow line in her hands as he eased the hull against the finger pontoon, reversing the prop to prevent the bow crunching the quay.

‘Jump!’

She hopped onto the finger, yelping as it dipped under her weight. She grinned sheepishly up at the bridge of the *Estelle*, then steadied herself and took the rope forward to the main pontoon, staring down at the mooring ring as if it were the most complex piece of technology she’d ever seen.

‘Tie it anyhow, Beth,’ Sam told her, favouring his voice towards their neighbour.

She fed the warp through the ring, then sat holding it, giving a good impression of not knowing what to do next. Out of the corner of his eye Sam saw the man they’d come to seduce step down from his boat.

‘Give you a hand, darling?’ Jimmy Squires’ voice was like raked gravel.

'I'm so stupid with ropes,' Midge simpered, handing him the warp.

The former SAS sergeant had curly fair hair, blue-grey eyes and a small v-shaped scar on his left cheek. There was nothing obviously threatening about him, but even bears looked cuddly, Sam reminded himself. He watched to ensure the man knew what he was doing with the lines, then cut the engine and stepped off the boat to secure their stern warp. As she received her lesson in knots, Midge leaned forward to give Squires a look down her front.

'I'm pretty new to boats,' Sam heard her gush. 'Haven't got the hang of things yet.'

'Anytime you want coachin', darlin' ...'

On the aft deck of the *Estelle* one of the women was plumpish, the other as trim and pretty as Thai girls were meant to be. Sam gave them a friendly nod, then climbed onto the foredeck to attach a second mooring line, passing the end to the man on the pontoon.

'Reckon I owe you a beer for that,' he said.

'Now you're talking ...'

Sam went below, brought out a four-pack from the coolbox, then held out a can to Squires.

'Steve and Beth.'

'Nice to meet you.' Squires took the beer and ripped off the ring-pull in one smooth movement. 'I'm Vince. The bloke up there ...' He pointed to the powerboat's high flying-bridge, '... is Nige. And the girls are Vicky and Jan. Their real names are a mile long and unpronounceable.'

His eyes radiated a cool intensity, but he looked at ease with the world. Midge was standing so close she was almost touching him.

'Where've you come from today?' Sam asked, raising the can to his lips.

'Ko Racha Yai,' Squires answered. 'Diving. You do any of that?' He indicated the air bottles secured to the side of the *Estelle's* sundeck.

‘Only snorkelling.’

‘That’s good too ... Fantastic fish. Water’s gin clear down there. This marina’s a sewer. Only came back in because the pump in the shower packed up. You girls need your luxuries, don’t you, darlin’?’ He smiled condescendingly. ‘What about you? Where’ve you been?’

‘We only picked the boat up this morning. Trying her out. Came back in for some more provisions.’

‘You won’t get out again tonight,’ Squires commented. ‘The tide’s too low.’

‘I know.’

‘Here for the Millennium?’

‘Seemed a good way to celebrate.’

‘Where do you live?’

‘Singapore. We work in financial services.’

Squires turned his gaze on Midge. ‘Don’t tell me you’re a money-brain too?’

‘That’s right. Any time you want your assets checking ...’

Squires’ chuckle was like a drain overflowing. ‘I think you’ll find them in good order ...’

The sound of feet on the pontoon made them turn. It was the mechanic, toolbox in one hand and a small cardboard spares carton in the other.

‘Been waiting for you, you little bugger.’ Squires clapped the young Thai on the shoulder, then swung a leg onto the *Estelle*. ‘Thanks for the beer. I’ll return the compliment later. Hop over in about an hour if you feel like it.’

‘Mind if we leave the timing loose?’ Sam replied. ‘Not sure how long things’ll take ashore.’

‘If you’re here, you’re here. If you’re not we won’t be offended.’

‘Thanks.’

Sam did a final tidying of the bridge then went below. Midge had preceded him and sat flopped on the saloon berth with her arms spread across the back.

‘That felt too easy,’ she whispered.

‘Yes.’

They looked at one another. Then Sam glanced at the bulkhead clock.

Midge nodded. ‘I’ll get some more clothes on.’ She stepped down into the cabin and started pulling things from her bag. Sam concealed the Thai police radio handset in a drawer, then stuffed a wallet in his pocket.

By the time they stepped onto the pontoon, the clouds had cleared completely, but the sun was well down and had lost its heat. Beneath a thin, long-sleeved top Midge was bra-less, Sam noticed. Her tanned legs protruded from skimpy yellow shorts, and she moved with the fluidity of a cat.

The pontoon ended at a long quay. On the far side was a yacht club with a toilet and shower block. Next to it a restaurant, a café and a small supermarket. Because their initial connection with Squires had gone so smoothly, Sam felt things could only get worse, a suspicion that intensified when he sneaked a glance back down the pontoon.

‘Shit ...’

Nige was ambling along the decking behind them.

‘Probably just needs the loo,’ Midge suggested under her breath.

‘Or keeping an eye on us for his master.’

They walked on.

‘Oh my God ...’

Sitting in the café was the plain-clothes policeman who’d radioed their berthing instructions. Dark trousers, striped shirt, portable VHF set on the table in front of him, he might as well have been in uniform.

Midge looked away in despair. Too late to shoo the man away. Nige was right behind. They walked quickly past the café and pushed open the door to the shop.

*

Thirty minutes later they returned to the boat carrying plastic bags of provisions, including a couple of bottles of overpriced Australian fizz. The sun had set by now and the sky was darkening. As they walked down the pontoon they could see Squires' lean face watching them from the deck of the *Estelle*. They sensed his suspicion, but when they drew near he held up a long glass, clouded with condensation.

'Hot work! What you need is one of these.'

'Great! Be over in a minute.' Sam swung the bags onto their own deck.

'What's your poison, Beth?'

'I'm a beer girl, Vince.' She gave him a cheery grin, trying to radiate a confidence she didn't feel.

'Beer for you too, Steve?'

Sam gave a thumbs up.

They stowed the shopping below, squeezed the wine bottles into the tiny fridge, then locked up again before stepping across to the other boat. Jan, the prettier of the Thai women, gave Midge a warning glare. The other held out a limp hand for them to shake.

'How long you guys got for your vacation?' Squires asked, handing each a can of Singha Draft.

'A week,' Sam told him. 'Escaping the concrete of Singapore and smelling real air for a change. You?'

'Same idea. Poodling around for a few days, seeing the new century in.'

'What sort of business are you in, Vince?' Midge asked.

Sam flinched at the directness of her question.

'This and that.' The ex-soldier narrowed his eyes. 'Know this area?'

'First time here.' Sam took a swig of his beer.

For a while they chatted about anchorages and inlets, the price of prawns and which islands had provisioning and restaurants. A second beer followed the first, but Sam noticed Squires had moved onto soft drinks. Nige and Vicky

took little part in the conversation, while Jan seemed more than a hanger-on because Squires kept turning to her for approval.

After a while Nige got restless, nudging Vicky until she got up and stepped into the saloon.

'We're eating soon,' Squires announced. 'Sorry we don't have enough to ask you to join us.'

'No problem,' said Sam, making to stand up.

'No rush,' Squires insisted. 'It'll be a while before she serves up. Finish your drink and tell us more about the two of you. Finance, you said. Doing what, exactly?'

'Investment management,' Sam replied, trying to give the words a mystique they didn't deserve. 'Private clients. People who want to use their money cleverly. Which means not losing it to the taxmen.'

'Or explaining where it comes from ...' Squires suggested, playfully.

'We ... we have to make sure it's in a useable form,' Sam cautioned.

'Of course.'

Tempting smells of hot ginger began to waft up from the galley below. Vicky emerged clutching cutlery which she plonked on the table.

Midge rested her hand on Sam's arm. 'Time we left these good people to their dinner, sweetie.'

Squires stood up. 'Nice to know you. If you're partying tomorrow night, give us a call on the VHF to say where you've dropped your hook.' He took Midge's arm as they stepped onto the pontoon. 'Give us a chance to get to know each other better.'

'Mmmm ... I'd like that.' She put a leg up onto their own boat.

'You two been together long?' His eyes swept over her body like an airport scanner.

'A while,' said Sam, uncomfortably realising it was a detail they hadn't discussed.

‘Nearly a year,’ Midge added.

‘See you in the morning then. Before you head off.’ The drug-runner climbed back over the rail onto the *Estelle*.

Down in the saloon, they flopped onto the sofas, hunching forward so they could speak without being overheard.

‘Now I know what fledglings feel like,’ Midge whispered eventually. ‘When a cat gets hold of them.’ She tilted her head back and let out a long gasp of relief. The exposed ridge of her throat had a purity to it which Sam found disturbingly erotic.

The smell of the food on the *Estelle* had made him hungry. Midge read his mind.

‘Try that restaurant next to the yacht club?’ she suggested.

‘Absolutely.’

Going ashore again would take his mind off the fact that in a couple of hours he’d be sharing a bed with this disconcertingly well-put-together woman, but with physical contact strictly taboo.

Friday, 31 December Millennium Eve

Sam was woken by the daylight streaming in through the cabin window. Instantly alert, he sat up and peered out, fearing their neighbour might have slipped away in the night. But the *Estelle* was still there.

He swung his legs to the floor and listened. Rigging pinged against a mast nearby, signifying a breeze. Its sound triggered a yearning to be under sail.

The space where Midge had lain was empty. He found her in the galley making coffee, still wearing the tee-shirt and briefs she’d slept in. The sight of her neat behind and

slim brown thighs as she stuck bread under the grill brought him fully awake.

'Been up long?' He rubbed his eyes. The bulkhead clock said 7.15.

'Half the bloody night. You were snoring like a walrus.'

'Sorry.'

'How does Julie put up with it?'

'Elbows me in the ribs and I turn over. If you hadn't been so against laying your hands on my body ...'

'Yeah, yeah ...'

'Any sign of life next door?'

'Nope.' She turned and looked quizzically at him. 'Who d'you reckon sleeps with whom over there?'

'Jimmy has Jan,' said Sam firmly.

'You'd think. Only he's not getting any. That guy was gagging for it last night. And why itch to make out with me if he had that little Thai poppet to play with?'

'Maybe you've got a better bum.'

She raised a contemptuous eyebrow. 'Seriously, I don't get the impression Jan's his playmate. She's more like a minder.'

'And Vicky?'

'Does the cooking - and anything else Nige wants. Looks to me like he found her in some bar. Not a very classy bar at that.'

'Thai police have anything on them?'

'Nothing useful. They tailed Jimmy to the airport, which is where Jan joined him. But they don't know who she is. The name on her ticket didn't fit anything on official records.'

'So,' Sam murmured, taking the coffee Midge offered him, 'where do we go from here, Inspector?'

'Whatever happens, we stick with him.'

'And if he doesn't tell us where he's going?'

'Then I'll have to make it clear I just can't bear to be parted from him.' She set her jaw, her eyes steely with

determination.

After they'd breakfasted and tidied the saloon, she handed him the wrench he'd used on the engine.

'I found this on the floor. Don't want to nag, but it probably has a home.'

'Leave it by the cooker and I'll put it away in a while.'

They washed, put on shorts and fresh tee-shirts, then went on deck to top up the water tank from a hose on the pontoon.

It was well after nine before Squires made an appearance, leaning over the rail of the *Estelle's* sundeck. When he spoke, there was a coolness to his voice that made them both uneasy.

'Off shortly, are you?'

'We were just talking about that,' Sam hedged. 'What about you?'

'The girls have gone shopping. Nige and I plan to relax until they get back. He's still in his pit, lazy bugger. Then we'll see. Might go north to Phang Nga, maybe over to Phi-Phi. Jan's got a friend visiting today.'

Sam's antennae twitched. There'd been no mention of a visitor last night.

'We still going to be able to toast the Millennium with you guys tonight?' Midge checked, stepping onto the foredeck and spreading out a towel to lie on.

'Maybe.' As Squires watched her apply cream to her legs, he smiled like a man who'd spotted a trap but who reckoned falling into it might be rather pleasurable. He turned his attention to Sam again. 'By the way, Steve, I was interested in what you were saying last night.'

There was something distinctly disingenuous about the way Squires said it.

'Anything in particular?'

'How you preserve confidentiality when you're hiding clients' money ...'

It was as if Squires was testing him on his cover story, but he played along. No alternative. He talked about nominee holdings and anonymous accounts. Squires listened hard, putting in questions every few minutes.

‘Interested for yourself?’ Sam queried.

The drug trader half-smiled and shook his head. ‘For a friend.’

It always was. ‘I’ll get you one of my cards. You can pass it on to him.’

A charade, but it couldn’t be *him* that ended it. As he turned to enter the saloon Squires called after him.

‘While you’re at it, give me one of Beth’s too.’

Sam rummaged in his bag for the visiting cards they’d printed the previous day. Then he felt the boat rock slightly. He looked through the window. Jimmy Squires had come aboard. Midge had sat up and was making room for him on the deck.

Sam re-emerged with the cards in his hand. Midge shot him a glare that said to leave her to get on with her seduction, so he climbed up to the bridge and pretended to busy himself with charts and the pilot book. Over on the *Estelle* Nige had surfaced. He was facing away from them, his eyes on the shore. Sam followed his gaze and saw the women returning. Squires had spotted them too and was hunching forward in anticipation.

Jan’s ‘friend’ turned out to be male. An oriental, dressed in a white polo shirt and dark trousers. He strode purposefully towards them, scowling at their foredeck as if there was something seriously amiss there which needed dealing with immediately.

Sam sensed things were about to go horribly wrong. He saw the alarm on Midge’s face and watched her pull her knees to her chest in an instinctive move to protect herself. He guessed she’d recognised the man.

By the time he’d clattered down to the deck, Squires was on his feet. Midge too, clutching the towel to her chest.

‘Scuse me a minute ...’ she whispered, trying to slip away.

Squires hooked an arm round her and pinned her to his side.

‘Don’t disappear, darlin’. This bloke spends a lot of time in Singapore. You’ll have things to talk about.’

The man approaching them looked more Chinese than Thai. A hard, square face with slicked back hair. He marched along the line of boats like a military commander, a small leather attaché case under his arm.

Midge began to panic. ‘Get off me!’ she snapped, struggling to escape Squires’ grip. But the drug-runner had no plans to let her go.

Sam sprang forward and wrenched Squires’ arm from her shoulders. Midge ducked away and stumbled across the deck towards the saloon. The former soldier bunched his fists.

‘I don’t know who the fuck you two jokers are, my friend ...’ He raised his right hand as if to give it to Sam full on the nose, but instead the fingers formed into the shape of a pistol which he jabbed against the middle of his forehead. ‘But if I come across you again, you’re dead!’

Holding his gaze for a couple of seconds, he turned away and hopped onto the pontoon, a hand snaking out to greet his guest.

Sam ducked inside the saloon, heart pounding. Midge was scrabbling through lockers. ‘Handset ...’ she hissed. ‘Where the fuck’s the ...?’

Sam pulled the police radio from a drawer and gave it to her.

‘Tell me ...’

‘Know his face.’ She turned the set on. ‘From photos in the files. Works for Yang Lai, the guy I was telling you about. Golden Triangle. He’s number two or three in the organisation. Name’s Hu Sin. And for some reason I can’t explain, the bastard seems to know *me*.’

From outside there was an explosive roar as the *Estelle's* engines started up. Sam heard feet on the deck and spun round.

Hu Sin filled the doorway. In his hand was a gun, its barrel extended by a silencer.

Sam stopped breathing. Midge had the handset to her mouth, but couldn't speak, transfixed by the pistol levelled at her head.

Packer backed against the galley counter, remembering the wrench they'd left on the worktop. Fingers closing round its shaft, he lunged forward, cracking it down on Hu Sin's arm.

The man yelped and the gun clattered to the floor. Midge unfroze and made a dive for it. His face twisting with pain, Hu Sin spun round and fled the saloon. The policewoman grappled with the pistol and took aim.

'Leave him!' Sam snapped. 'He's not the one you want.'

They heard the clunk of feet on the finger pontoon as mooring lines were freed. Then the engine noise declined as the *Estelle* reversed from the berth.

'Fuck!' Midge hissed. 'Fuck, fuck, fuck!'

'How does he know you?' Sam growled, furious at coming so close to death for a cause she'd told him so little about.

'*I don't know ...*' she howled. Then she caught herself, put a fist to her mouth and closed her eyes. She'd remembered.

Through the wide stern window of the saloon they saw the *Estelle* accelerate away. Jimmy Squires was at the wheel. On the cruiser's aft deck Jan and Hu Sin stood side by side, the man talking on a mobile phone, the woman clicking with a long-lensed camera.

Sam turned his face away. Theirs was a photo album he had no wish to grace.