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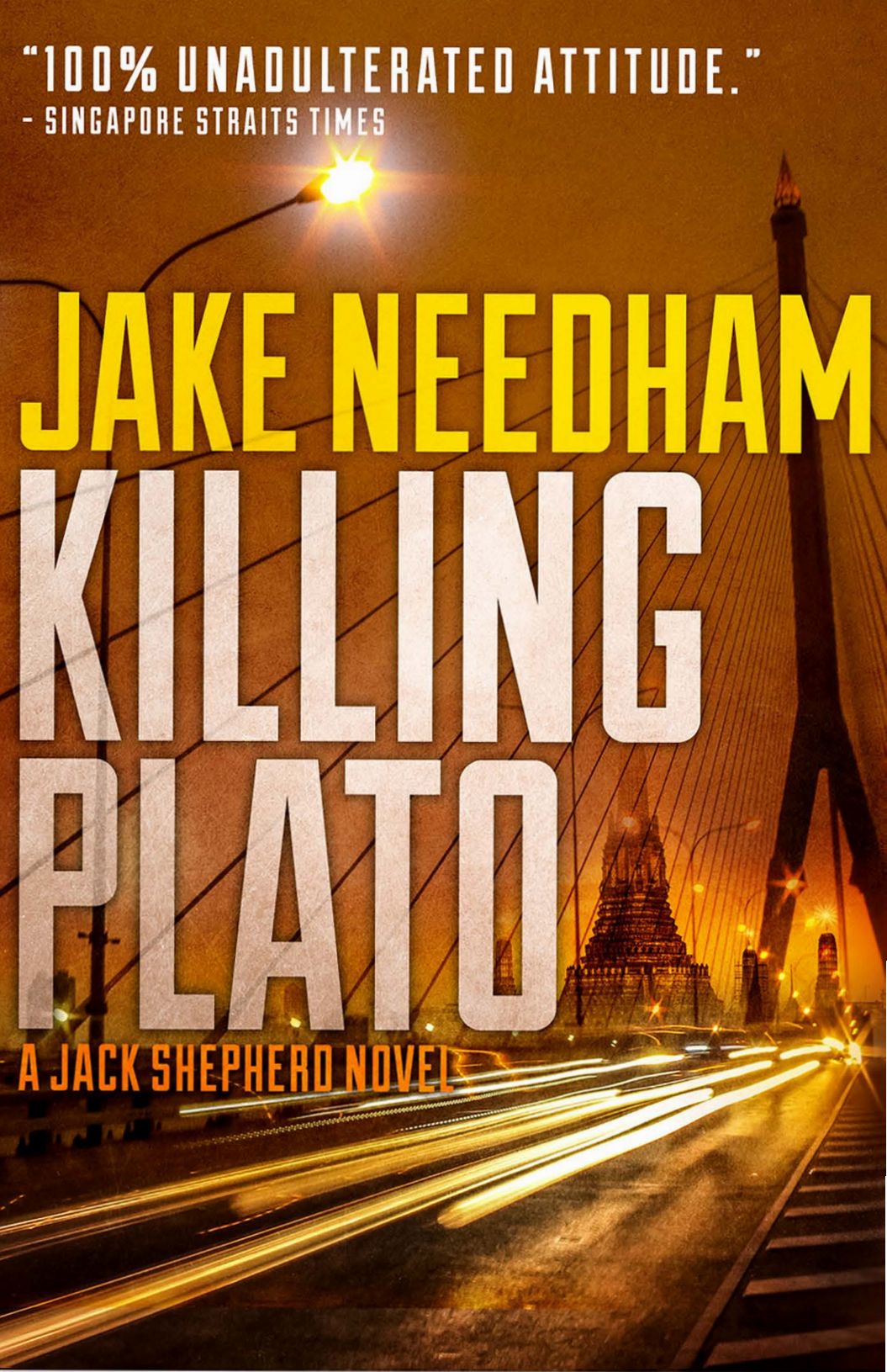
- SINGAPORE STRAITS TIMES

JAKE NEEDHAM

KILLING

PLATO

A JACK SHEPHERD NOVEL



KILLING PLATO

A Jack Shepherd Novel

Jake Needham

Half Penny Ltd
Hong Kong

THE BEGINNING

Phuket

“The only player who wins
is the one who owns the game.”

—Meyer Lansky,
mobster

1

IT STARTED THE way a spy story should start.

On a misty night in Phuket.

In a little bar.

I recognized him the moment I walked in. He was standing by himself holding a tiny stainless steel telephone to his ear. His body was turned slightly away from me, his elbows resting on the polished teakwood of the bar top, and he was gazing out toward the ocean, nodding his head occasionally, listening more than he was talking.

Plato Karsarkis could not be here of all places, casually leaning on a bar in Phuket, a resort island off the eastern coast of Thailand. There was plainly no way in the world that could be.

Yet, just as plainly, there he was.

Anita and I had spent the day exploring. A warm drizzle began to fall late in the afternoon and we decided to call it a day and have an early dinner at a place called the Boathouse that is right on the sand at Kata Beach. I parked the jeep and Anita stopped at the ladies room while I went in to get us a table. The girl at the hostess stand said she would have one free in fifteen or twenty minutes, so I left my name and went into the bar to wait.

The bar was laid out in the shape of a large C. Plato Karsarkis

was leaning on the side nearest the ocean and so I took a stool on the opposite side that offered both a striking panorama of the Andaman Sea and the opportunity to stare at Karsarkis without being too obvious about it. I ordered a Heineken and wondered what Anita's face would look like when she came out of the ladies' room and saw him.

Anita had designated this trip to Phuket as our official honeymoon and she had been obsessive about making every detail of it perfect. We were both well into our forties—I somewhat more so than she—and we had been living together for almost two years before we got married so I really couldn't understand why she was making such a big deal out of having a honeymoon now. Still, Anita had her own ways, and I had absolutely no intention of risking a quarrel by volunteering my thoughts on the subject.

Anita was an artist, a painter whom European art circles had clasped to their bosom as a harbinger of what the critics were calling a new wave of post-feminist revisionism, whatever that meant. Even when her behavior didn't make complete sense to me, I always tried to remember Anita had an ability to see the world in ways that I could not, ways that were continually surprising and frequently illuminating.

I shifted my weight on the stool to cover the turn of my body and glanced back toward Karsarkis.

He seemed taller in person than he had on television, although I had always heard it was supposed to be the other way around. His forehead was quite high, his nose rounded in that way that some people call Roman, and his curly gray hair trimmed closely against his skull. He wore a tight black T-shirt tucked into black chinos cinched with a narrow belt, also black, and although he must have been in his fifties, maybe even older, he looked pretty able-bodied. The whole effect was something like a cross between Giorgio Armani and Richard Nixon.

What he did *not* look like, leaning nonchalantly there on the bar and talking into his shiny little telephone, was the world's most

famous fugitive. Which was funny, because that was exactly what he was.

“That was a Heineken,” the bartender said, breaking into my reverie. “Right?”

I pulled my eyes away from Karsarkis. “Right,” I said.

The bartender placed a tall glass still frosty from the cooler on a blue and white striped square of cotton and poured my beer from the familiar green bottle. When he was done, he rapped the empty bottle smartly on the bar top, nodded, and walked away.

As soon as he did, my eyes flicked right back to Plato Karsarkis.

Karsarkis had put away his mobile phone and now he was just leaning against the bar on his forearms, doing nothing in particular. Oddly, it almost seemed as if he was looking at *me*. So unlikely was that it took several seconds for me to register that he really *was* looking at me. Worse, when Karsarkis saw the realization of it in my eyes, he raised his right index finger and shook it at me in an exaggerated gesture of mock irritation.

I flashed a hasty and very self-conscious smile and, thoroughly embarrassed, looked down at the bar. I was reaching for my glass again just to have something to do when Karsarkis called out to me.

“Are you Jack Shepherd?”

My first thought of course was that I had misunderstood him. Plato Karsarkis could not have been speaking to me or have the slightest idea who I was. So I kept my eyes forward and said nothing.

“Pardon me,” Karsarkis called out again. “You’re Jack Shepherd, aren’t you?”

Christ, I *had* heard him right. Karsarkis *was* speaking to me, and he *did* know who I was. With what I’m certain was a look of utter bafflement, I lifted my eyes back to Karsarkis. He shook his finger at me again, and then he stood up and started around the bar.

Holy shit.

The world’s most famous fugitive was not only alive and well and having a drink at the Boathouse in Phuket, he was walking straight toward me, his hand thrust out to shake mine.

2

I TOOK KARSARKIS' hand. What else was I going to do? We shook.

"I'm Plato Karsarkis."

"I know."

Karsarkis nodded quickly and lowered his eyes. The man's brief acknowledgement of his notoriety seemed to me to contain an element of genuine embarrassment and, for a moment, I almost felt sorry for him.

"May I?" Karsarkis pointed to the stool to my right, the one at the end of the bar right up against the wall.

"Of course."

He pulled the stool out and sat down, pushing himself around until his back was to the wall and his face turned toward mine. The bartender had returned when he saw Karsarkis reach for the stool and stood waiting quietly.

"Campari and soda," Karsarkis said without looking at him. "And Mr. Shepherd will have another..."

His eyebrows lifted into a question.

"No thanks," I said. "I'm fine."

Karsarkis nodded slightly at that, but made no comment. After a moment his eyes slid off mine and we sat there together in what

was for me an uneasy silence until the bartender returned with his drink. After that, Karsarkis took a deep breath and let it out again and I thanked heaven that it looked like he was finally going to say *something*.

“It’s so beautiful here,” Karsarkis said very softly. “I could stay in this place forever.”

I didn’t know exactly what I had been expecting Karsarkis to say, but it certainly wasn’t that.

Turning my head, I looked where his eyes were pointing.

The Boathouse was at the edge of the beach in the back of a deep cove on Phuket’s west coast. Just on the other side of floor-to-ceiling shutters propped open to the ocean breeze, a wide swath of nearly white sand lay nestled in a U-shaped fringe of spindly palm trees. It was almost dark, but not quite, and a haze of pewter streaked with shards of mango yellow filtered tentatively over the beach like a feeble fog. A lone woman with a black sarong wrapped around her bathing suit—foreign, I thought, but at this distance I couldn’t quite tell—ambled along the surf line, kicking her bare feet through the shallow water.

I glanced back at Karsarkis. He didn’t seem inclined to say anything else. I should have waited him out, I know, but I didn’t.

“Look,” I said, taking a deep breath and plunging in, “I’m sure I would remember if we’d met, and I don’t think—”

“We’ve never met. I just recognize you.”

“Recognized me?”

“Modesty bores me, and false modesty bores the *shit* out of me. You’re well known and I’m sure you realize that. I’ve even seen pictures of you in magazines and newspapers. That’s why I recognized you.”

While it was true I had once been associated in various ways with some big players in international finance, I certainly didn’t think of myself as well known. I might be recognized here and there by a few people who moved in similar circles, but I really didn’t think those circles included the sort of people who breathed

the rarified air where Plato Karsarkis flew.

“There aren’t many other Americans living out here,” Karsarkis went on before I could figure out what to say. “So I just thought I ought to introduce myself.”

“There are a lot of foreigners living in Thailand,” I said.

I realized how petulant that sounded as soon as the words were out of my mouth, but I couldn’t call them back.

Karsarkis didn’t seem to notice or, if he did, to care.

“Yeah, but it’s mostly Europeans and a few Australians,” he said. “Not that many Americans in Thailand. Why do you think that is?”

“I gather most Americans must like it well enough back home.”

“Then you still think of the States as your home?”

It was starting to sound like we were going to have one of those expatriate conversations I’d had a thousand times since I’d been living in Thailand. Modesty might be what bored Karsarkis. Expat conversations were what bored me.

“Look,” I said, “I live in Thailand now and as far as I know I’m going to keep living here. I really don’t know what else to tell you.”

“There’s something I’ve always wondered about,” Karsarkis continued as if I had not spoken. “When Europeans or Australians live in a country that isn’t their own, nobody thinks a thing about it. But when Americans choose to live in another country, people keep asking us why.”

“A lot of people seem to think that Americans who live overseas are on the run from something.”

As soon as I said it I went silent and looked away in embarrassment. Karsarkis chuckled at my discomfort.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “You didn’t offend me. We Americans need to stick together.”

Karsarkis’ ethnic brotherhood routine was wearing a little thin. I was pretty sure I’d read once he had been born in London of an Irish mother and a Greek father and had only become an American citizen when his lawyers advised him that it was in his best financial

interest. On the other hand, I knew Karsarkis had a pretty compelling reason for not being in the United States right then and I figured it would be indelicate to delve too deeply into the whole issue of nationality and residence so I said nothing.

Karsarkis smiled. At least I think he did.

“Can I call you Jack?” he asked.

“If you like.”

“Excellent. Then you should call me Plato.”

That’ll be the day, I thought to myself, but I just nodded.

Karsarkis took his hand away from the Campari without having drunk a sip and folded his arms across his chest.

“Everybody says you’re one of the smart guys, Jack. A first-rate legal mind.”

“I don’t practice law anymore. I just teach.”

“Yeah, I heard that. At Chulalongkorn University up in Bangkok.”

“That’s right.”

“Pretty good place?”

“Pretty good.”

“But you don’t teach at the law school, do you?”

“No. At the Sasin Institute. I teach international business.”

“You speak Thai that well?”

“My Thai’s okay, I guess, but the courses at Sasin are all in English so it doesn’t really matter.”

“You like teaching?”

“Yes, I like it a lot.”

What in the world was going on here? Karsarkis sounded like a man interviewing me for a job. I tried to read his eyes, but they had gone flat and in the fading light there at the end of the bar I could see nothing in them at all.

“You ever miss the action?” he asked.

“Action?”

“That stuff you used to do. All the hotshot stuff that made you famous.”

I didn't know how to respond to that, so I didn't say anything at all. Karsarkis didn't look like he really cared. Abruptly he stood up and gave the room a quick scan.

"I enjoyed talking to you, Jack, but I've got to go now."

I glanced around to see if something had spooked Karsarkis. There were a few people scattered around the bar, a few others in the dining room, but as far as I could tell there were no SWAT teams storming the place. Maybe Karsarkis just couldn't think of anything else to say to someone he barely knew and was tired of keeping the conversation going. I could certainly understand that.

I stood up, too, and we shook hands again.

"I'll stay in touch," Karsarkis said.

I had no idea what *that* meant so I just nodded mutely.

When Karsarkis turned away and started for the door, a well-built, sandy-haired man of nondescript appearance and indeterminate age stood up from a chair by the wall and fell into step next to him. Almost immediately two other men materialized from somewhere and closed up behind them, covering their backs. I had assumed Karsarkis was alone. Now that I thought about it, I realized how foolish that was of me.

After Karsarkis had gone, I just sat on my stool looking straight ahead, too stupefied by what had happened to do anything else. Then all at once an incredibly vivid memory swept over me.

I had been about seven or eight. My father and I were driving somewhere, although I have long forgotten where, in his green and black Buick, a racy two-door model with a line of chromed ports down each side of the long, narrow hood. I sat on the bench seat next to him as straight and proud as my tiny stature would permit.

We were on a two-lane asphalt highway passing through dense stands of tall pine trees. A short distance ahead, a silver and white Greyhound bus pulled out to pass a tractor-trailer and shifted its whole mass into the lane directly in front of us. My head was half turned toward the road and half turned toward my father and, in the same instant I saw the bus barreling down on us, I also saw my

father's face. Although only a child, I somehow sensed that he and I were both sharing the same inexplicable thrill of onrushing menace.

As the bus drew closer and the leaping white dog on its nose grew to a terrifying size, I experienced without really knowing what I was feeling that eerily heightened state of awareness that comes from proximity to something truly dangerous. For just an instant, my father and I were frozen together, bonded to one another by our common helplessness.

Then the bus cut back into its own lane, whipped past us, and we were spared. The moment ended. I would never feel that close to my father again.

There at the bar of the Boathouse, looking at the stool where Karsarkis had been sitting and the drink he had abandoned, a feeling came back to me that was just like the one I'd had on that long-ago day: exhilaration intertwined with onrushing ruin. It was a strange reaction, I know, and at the time I dismissed the feeling that flooded over me then as nothing more than a freak misconnection of a few synapses of memory run amuck. It was only later, looking back on everything that happened afterwards, that I could see how wrong I had been.

The feeling that came over me that day in Phuket had not been a memory at all.

It was a premonition.

3

“YOU LOOK AS if you’ve seen a ghost, my darling.” Anita glanced at the Campari and soda on the bar. “Is that for me?”

“You can have it if you want,” I said. “Plato Karsarkis ordered it, but he didn’t drink any of it.”

I inclined my head in the direction where Karsarkis and his entourage had just disappeared.

“He just left,” I added.

Anita sat down on the stool Karsarkis had vacated and crossed her legs at the knee. Arranging her skirt, she pushed the Campari to the back of the bar and studied me closely.

“What happened while I was gone, Jack? You’re staring at me like I just turned into Whoopi Goldberg.”

I was still trying to decide how to explain what had happened in such a way Anita might actually believe it when she unerringly zeroed in on my uncertainty. But then she jumped to the wrong conclusion.

“Which old girlfriend of yours is here, Jack?” Anita craned her neck theatrically around the room. “Are you going to introduce us?”

Before I could muster a response to that, the hostess walked up carrying two red and gold covered menus.

“I have a table for you now,” she smiled.

Then the hostess caught the set of Anita’s features and stopped smiling. She glanced from Anita to me and back again.

“Do you still want a table?”

“Of course we do, my dear.” Anita patted the girl on her forearm. “My husband is just trying to come up with some kind of a story to explain away his slightly sordid past.”

When I stood up, the hostess backed away and shifted her eyes around the room as if she were searching for help, then turned and scurried off toward a table on the far side of the dining room. By the time Anita and I got to it, the hostess had already abandoned two menus and fled back to the safety of her station by the door.

“Nice going,” I said as I pulled out Anita’s chair for her. “Now that girl probably thinks I’m a pimp on holiday.”

Anita said nothing. She turned her full attention to the menu and appeared to lose all interest in whatever might be on my mind. She appeared to, but I knew better. Anita was a master of the technique used by all the best television interviewers. She asked a question, and she waited for the answer. Then after you had answered whatever she had asked, she waited some more in complete silence, which naturally got you to thinking you hadn’t given a very good answer or perhaps you had left something out.

That was when you started talking again, usually without thinking very much before you did, and while you were rambling around trying to find something new to say that would satisfy her enough to get her to go on to the next question . . . BAM! . . . that was when she got what she needed to kill you.

I knew all that, but I decided to take a chance anyway. What I had to tell Anita was just too good to wait any longer. I pushed my menu to one side and took a deep breath.

“Please listen to me carefully, Anita, because I’m being completely serious here. I did not see an old girlfriend. I saw Plato Karsarkis. I walked into the bar while you were in the bathroom and he was standing there talking on a mobile phone. I sat down

and a couple of minutes later he walked over, introduced himself, and took the stool next to me.”

Anita didn't react. She didn't even look up from her menu.

“It's true,” I said, thinking to myself how pathetic I sounded when I did.

There was a short silence.

“I know I had lobster last night,” Anita finally said, “but Phuket lobster is so wonderful. What do you think? Should I have lobster again?”

“Anita, I am telling you exactly what happened when you were in the bathroom. Plato Karsarkis was here.”

“And he walked over and introduced himself.”

“Yes.”

“To you.”

“Yes.”

“Did he say why?”

“He told me he had heard of me.”

Anita finally looked up from her menu, but her expression remained neutral.

“He'd heard of you?”

“Yes. He said he'd heard I had a first-rate legal mind.”

Helpless before the male compulsion to brag to an attractive woman, actually to almost any woman, I ventured a bit further down that road before I could stop myself.

“He said I was pretty well known in certain circles.”

Anita looked back down again at her menu.

“Then perhaps I *will* have the lobster,” she said. “You certainly ought to be able to afford it.”

“Anita, I'm telling you I just had a conversation with Plato Karsarkis right over there at that bar.”

I gestured pointlessly across the room and I felt suitably foolish as soon as I had done it.

“I thought he was supposed to be dead,” Anita said, glancing up again, but only with her eyes.

“Some people think so,” I said, “but obviously he isn’t.”

“And what is Plato Karsarkis doing in Phuket?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t say.”

I had no difficulty at all understanding Anita’s conviction that I was pulling her leg. Plato Karsarkis was the most notorious international corporate criminal since Marc Rich had scammed a billion dollars and rented the Prime Minister of Israel to lean on his buddy Bill Clinton to get himself pardoned. What’s more, Karsarkis was famously secretive, legendarily elusive, and so stories had it, constantly attended by a squad of Irish bodyguards widely said to be provided by the IRA for which Karsarkis did a few favors in return from time to time. Anita knew very well that a few months before, Plato Karsarkis had vanished off the face of the earth and hadn’t been seen by anyone since.

Why *wouldn’t* Anita think I was joking? Even I was having a little trouble believing this had really happened.

Anita was still studying the menu when I sensed rather than heard someone behind me. I turned my head and sure enough a man was standing there. A moment before he had not been there, and now he was, and since we were sitting all the way across the dining room, a rather long way for anyone to walk unnoticed, I couldn’t imagine where he had come from.

He was youngish with a common and forgettable face, and he was dressed in a short-sleeved white shirt with dark trousers and a nondescript blue tie. He made me think of a mid-level bureaucrat at some government agency.

“I’m Mike O’Connell,” the man said, not offering his hand. “I work for Mr. Karsarkis.”

I shot Anita a triumphant glance, but she took her time looking up and missed it altogether.

Keeping his hands clasped together in front of him, the man went on in a soft voice that carried the hint of an accent I couldn’t quite place.

“Mr. Karsarkis would like to invite you to join him for dinner

tomorrow night. If you're available, he'll send a car."

Before I had a chance to say anything, Anita did.

"This is utterly ridiculous." She glared at the young man and poked her forefinger in my direction. "He put you up to this and I want you to know right now I'm not going to fall for it."

"No, ma'am, he didn't." Mike O'Connell didn't seem particularly surprised by Anita's skepticism. "Mr. Karsarkis asked me to come in here and invite you to dinner."

"Plato Karsarkis?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"*The* Plato Karsarkis."

"He's the only one I know, ma'am."

"And you seriously expect me to believe Plato Karsarkis is here in Phuket and he sent you to invite us to dinner tomorrow?"

"Yes, ma'am. Mr. Karsarkis just spoke with your husband. Hasn't Mr. Shepherd mentioned it to you yet?"

Anita lowered her menu, closed it with exaggerated care, and put it down on the table.

"I think he might have said something to that effect, now that you mention it."

"Yes, ma'am."

I finally tagged the accent.

"You're an American," I said. "New York? Boston? Around there?"

The young man summoned up something close to half a smile, but I thought he seemed a bit careful about doing it and didn't answer me.

"We'd be delighted to join Mr. Karsarkis for dinner," Anita said all of a sudden.

I turned my face away from Karsarkis' emissary and raised my eyebrows to get Anita's attention. "I'm not sure—"

"I am, Jack."

She flicked her eyes back to the young man.

"What time tomorrow, Mr. O'Connell?"

"Would eight o'clock be convenient? If you'll tell me where

you're staying, we'll send a car for you."

"And where are we having dinner exactly?"

"At Mr. Karsarkis' home, Mrs. Shepherd. He is having several people around tomorrow night and thought you and your husband might like to join them."

Anita nodded slowly. "You'll appreciate, of course, I'm still having a little trouble with all this."

"Yes, ma'am. Apparently."

"I hope you'll excuse me saying so, Mr. O'Connell, but it is difficult for me to accept that Plato Karsarkis is quietly living in Phuket and giving dinner parties."

"Yes, ma'am. But that's where he is and that's what he's doing. Where shall I tell the driver to pick you up?"

"Never mind about that," I cut in.

I tried to strike a tone cool enough to leave no doubt at all as to my view of Karsarkis' invitation.

"We're not going," I said. "We have other plans."

"We *are* going, Jack." Anita's voice was low, but her tone was just as cool as mine had been. "I'd like to go."

"Can we talk about this later, Anita?"

"No." Her faced mimed a smile, but I didn't see any humor in it. "We can't."

I looked at O'Connell. He was expressionless. I felt trapped. I gathered I was.

"Okay," I finally said. "But no car. We'll drive ourselves."

"Then may I fax a map to your hotel, sir? That would probably be best."

Not only was Plato Karsarkis living in Phuket and giving dinner parties, he was faxing out maps to his house.

"That's fine," I said. "We're staying at a hotel on Cape Panwa called the Panwaburi. I don't know the fax number, but—"

"You'll have a map by tomorrow morning, sir."

O'Connell took a step back from the table and inclined his head politely.

“Enjoy your dinner,” he said. Then he turned and walked away across the dining room.

I looked at Anita without saying anything. She looked back at me with an expression I couldn’t read.

“Well,” she finally murmured, breaking the silence. Then she retrieved her menu from the table and resumed studying it. “Shall we order?”

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