



THE AN INSPECTOR SAMUEL TAY NOVEL
AMBASSADOR'S
WIFE

JAKE
NEEDHAM

*"JAKE NEEDHAM IS
MICHAEL CONNELLY
WITH STEAMED RICE!"
THE BANGKOK POST*

THE AMBASSADOR'S WIFE

An Inspector Samuel Tay Novel

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WHEN his cell phone rang, Inspector Samuel Tay considered ignoring it. But then he always considered ignoring it and he almost never did, so he answered it just as he usually ended up doing.

The caller was a sergeant Tay didn't know. He told Tay the Officer in Charge of the Special Investigations Section of CID wanted him to come the Singapore Marriott urgently. Tay asked what was going on. The sergeant said he didn't know.

Oddly enough, Tay was at that moment only a few blocks from the Marriott. He was stretching his lunch hour a bit browsing in Sunny's, a used bookstore whose cheerful disorder was almost an act of public rebellion in tidy little Singapore. Sunny's was on the third floor of Far East Plaza only a couple of hundred yards up Scotts Road. Was that just a coincidence, Tay wondered, or was he being summoned because the OC somehow knew he was at Sunny's? He doubted his personal habits were that well known, but in Singapore you could never be absolutely certain about a thing like that.

Tay took the steps down to street level and walked quickly up Scotts Road. As he dodged through the sidewalk crowds he tried not to think too much about where he was going. He didn't just dislike the Marriott, he loathed the goddamned place.

The Singapore Marriott was a thirty-three story octagonal-shaped tower crowned by a gigantic Chinese-style roof that loomed over the corner of Scotts and Orchard Roads, the busiest intersection in the city. The roof was no doubt supposed to soften the building's appearance by making it look vaguely reminiscent of a traditional Chinese pagoda. Tay thought that was ridiculous. What it really made the building look like was a giant dildo. Worse, the stupid roof was green with something right at its peak that resembled a red pom-pom. The Marriott not only looked like a giant dildo, it looked like a giant dildo wearing a green rubber with a red tip on it.

Merry fucking Christmas everybody.

It broke his heart sometimes, this city of his. Back before the Marriott had been built, there was a traditional Chinese department store on that very same corner. It was a glorious building, each of its five floors wrapped in graceful, iron-arched galleries supported by tiled colonnades. Tay remembered the mysterious air they had cast over the structure, the way they had obscured its interior in dim shadows and enveloped it in an unnaturally soft, almost dreamlike light. Parallel lines of dark green shutters bordered every floor of the store and, as Singapore's warm winds blew in and out of the half-open windows, the shutters clicked and clattered together with a sound that came back to him now with absolute clarity even after almost forty years.

Buildings like that were all gone, as gone as if they had never existed at all, and now the city was mostly somewhere he did not know, somewhere he had never been. For over thirty years the people who decided such things, the bastards, had been tearing down glorious structures just because they were old. Sometimes they even replaced them with new structures touted as modern versions of whatever they replaced. They never were, of course. They never were anything, really, other than just new. Through the merciless grinders of progress the soul of a city had passed, along even with Tay's own soul, and each of them had emerged

as...well, he really had no idea.

Sometimes Tay thought he could close his eyes and see everything again just as it had been before, back when he was eight years old and Singapore was thrilling to him; but he wasn't absolutely sure anymore he really could. Was he seeing something he actually remembered, or was he only seeing something he hoped he remembered?

The older Tay got, the harder it was for him to tell.

TAY'S sergeant, Robbie Kang, was waiting for him just inside the Marriott's main entrance. Kang had long, black hair and a fair complexion and was tall and gangly for a Singaporean. He was wearing his customary short-sleeved white shirt with a button-down collar and a pair of dark chinos.

"What's going on, Sergeant?"

"They didn't tell you, sir?"

"All I know is that somebody called to say the Chief wanted me here fast. And when the big bull trumpets, I answer the call."

Kang didn't smile, so Tay stopped smiling.

"What is it, Sergeant?"

"We've got a deceased woman upstairs, sir. A homicide. It's..." Kang hesitated and Tay could see his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. "I'm told it's messy, sir. Very messy."

Inspector Tay did not like messy. He and Sergeant Kang didn't talk about it, but Tay knew Robbie Kang knew perhaps all too well. He really did not like messy.

"You haven't looked at the scene yourself yet, Sergeant?"

"No, sir." Kang shoved his glasses up the bridge of his nose with his forefinger. "Not yet."

Tay had never before had to deal with a woman found dead in one of the city's five-star hotels, not even a neatly expired woman let alone one who had become deceased in such a manner that Sergeant Kang felt compelled to describe it as messy. And he really didn't want to start now.

Even after nearly twenty years as a policeman, each time he approached the scene of a violent crime he struggled against a squeamishness he feared might yet master him entirely. For years he had watched his colleagues out of the corner of his eye searching for someone else who shared his secret weakness, but he had never found anyone at all. As far as he could tell, his colleagues thought nothing of spending an afternoon poking around the charred corpses of two children killed in a suspicious apartment fire and then going straight out for a rare steak.

Tay couldn't do it. Whatever gene might be required to achieve that sort of detachment, he lacked it.

For a fleeting moment, Tay toyed with telling Sergeant Kang that he could no longer bear any of it. He would not on this day stand gazing down at broken bones, unsupported flesh, and extruded innards. He would not squat down next to a glistening heap of blood and tissue, poke at blood-drenched clothing, and try to still his pounding heart while he fought against nausea. He would not do that again. Not ever again.

But Tay said none of that.

What he said was this.

“Okay, Sergeant, let's get to it then.”

The elevators were only a few steps away. Kang pushed the call button and one opened immediately. Inside, Kang touched twenty-six, Tay heard a slight humming sound, and the elevator doors closed as silently as they had opened. As he and Sergeant Kang levitated in an air-conditioned hush, Tay tilted his head back against the polished wood paneling and shut his eyes.

Singapore was normally an uncomplicated place to be a policeman, particularly one who investigated homicides. In Tay's tiny country — its five million people an ethnic stew of Chinese, Malays, Indians, Caucasians, and Eurasians together with a smattering of almost every other race on earth — there were few criminals and even fewer killers. No more than a couple of dozen murders were committed in Singapore each year, almost all of which were the result of domestic violence. But that Singapore's

few killers mostly killed people to whom they were related did nothing to make the killings any easier for Samuel Tay to take.

In his two decades in the Criminal Investigation Department of the Singapore Police Force, Tay had seen enough dead bodies to last him several lifetimes: bodies broken in stairwells and bodies dumped in alleys; bodies battered by cricket bats and bodies crushed with tire irons; bodies opened with gaping knife wounds and bodies flattened by cinder blocks; bodies beaten into raw meat with golf clubs and bodies ripped into unidentifiable shreds by dogs; bodies in bed with their hands neatly folded and bodies in the harbor with crabs crawling out of them. Tay had stared at all kinds of dead bodies and he could remember each and every one of them with a clarity verging on the pornographic.

Murders in Singapore weren't the romanticized duels between clever killers and plodding investigators that ended up as Michael Douglas movies. They were mostly sad and sordid events perpetrated by people who had lost money, lost a job, lost a spouse, lost hope. When Tay entered the places where desperation had taken control of people and turned them into killers, he could feel their sadness and despair pressing down on him. It was as real and palpable as a shroud.

Was he just getting old or was the carnage getting worse? When Tay first began investigating murders, he assumed he was dealing with people who were more or less like the people policemen had always dealt with, but he wasn't so sure of that anymore. More and more these days, Tay found himself thinking that the truth of it was really quite simple: we are worse people now than we were twenty years ago, and every year we get even worse.

Tay didn't want to believe that, he really didn't, but so help him God, at the bottom of whatever passed for his soul these days, he was certain it was true.

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“HERE we are, sir,” Sergeant Kang said when the elevator doors opened.

“What’s the room number?”

Before Kang could answer, a blue-uniformed patrolman appeared from somewhere. “I’m sorry, sir, but this floor is closed to all—”

Tay lifted his right hand, palm outward. “CID-SIS. I’m Inspector Tay and this is Sergeant Kang.”

“Yes, sir. Could I see your—”

“What room, Robbie?” Tay asked again, cutting off the patrolman.

“2608, sir.”

Tay strode off down the corridor and Sergeant Kang pulled his plastic-coated warrant card from his back pocket and draped the chain around his neck. The patrolman barely glanced at it. Instead, he shot a look toward where Tay had already disappeared.

“He’s okay,” Kang said. “He’s just having one of his twitchy days.”

“If you say so, sir.”

The Marriott has only sixteen guest rooms on each floor. All of them face the outside of the tower while a wide corridor

carpeted in wine red and bordered with brown-and-white marble traces the building's octagonal shape around the core where the three passenger elevators and the service elevator are located. The corridor itself is entirely white. White walls, white doors, white ceiling. Lighted by a soft glow from the wall sconces spaced evenly along both sides, the whole effect is tranquil to the point of being spooky.

There were four men outside the door to room 2608. Three wore dark suits and were arrayed in a sort of arc facing the doorway, in front of which the fourth, a uniformed patrolman, stood with his arms folded. The grouping made Tay think of a tiny band of Christmas carolers waiting for a choirmaster to lead them in song.

"I'm Inspector Tay," he announced when he got to where the men were standing. "And this is Sergeant Kang."

"Oh, thank Christ. I'm Bill Barwell. I'm the general manager.

Tay examined the man who had spoken and registered both his American accent and the chummy way he had introduced himself. Was anyone actually named Bill? That was just a nickname for William, wasn't it?

"This is Mike Evans, my Executive Assistant Manager," Barwell continued, indicating the man on his left, "and my other colleague is Ramesh Keshar, our Chief of Security."

Tay glanced at Evans, whose short hair and well-scrubbed face unmistakably marked him as another American. So far, Tay thought, this had all the makings of an authentically crappy day. First the stupid building, and now all these Americans.

Tay didn't dislike Americans. Not as such. Not really. Some of his best friends...well, no, it wouldn't be true to say that. Tay had to admit that there were a number of things he admired about Americans. Their self-assurance, their boldness, their generosity, their even-handedness, their easy manner, their willingness to take risks. Most of all, he admired their sense of absolute certainty that the world would step aside and make room for them wherever they went merely because they were Americans.

Neither any of those character traits nor that kind of self-confidence were commonly found in the Singaporean temperament so Tay's experience in dealing with people like that was limited. Actually, to be entirely honest, Samuel Tay didn't really understand the first thing about people like that. He supposed that was why Americans made him uneasy. They scratched him where he didn't itch.

Tay ignored both Barwell and Evans and looked at the security man.

"You're a local hire?" Tay asked him.

"Yes, sir, I am," Keshar said. "Singaporean born and bred."

Tay nodded at that. At least there was one person he could talk to here who wasn't an American.

Sergeant Kang took out a notebook and turned to Barwell. "Did you discover the body?"

"Me? Oh, good Lord, no. Not me."

"Then who was it, sir?"

"Someone from housekeeping, as I understand it." The manager flicked his eyes to Keshar. "Is that right, Ramesh?"

"Yes, sir. She was running her regular room checks. When she found the body, she called me and I came right up."

"Where is the maid now?" Tay asked Keshar.

"She's a housekeeping supervisor," the manager interrupted. "Not a maid."

Tay kept his eyes on the security man and waited.

"Downstairs in my office," the security man eventually replied when he saw that Tay intended to ignore the general manager until he did. "The poor woman is hysterical. I left her with my secretary."

"Where did this..." Tay shot a quick glance at the manager, "housekeeping supervisor telephone you from?"

"Probably the service area. I'm not really sure. She certainly wouldn't have stayed in there to call." Keshar inclined his head toward the door to 2608 and Tay noticed he looked away from it when he did.

"You've been inside the room?" Tay asked.

"Just long enough to verify what the housekeeping supervisor told me. No longer than I had to."

Tay finally shifted his eyes back to the manager. "You, sir?"

"No, no." The man shook his head quickly and his pale skin seemed to grow even paler. "Jesus Christ, no. Not me."

Tay found himself enjoying the manager's discomfort and kept his eyes on him until the man glanced away. Only then did Tay turn his attention back to Keshar.

"What did you do when you went into the room?"

"I just rang the...it's actually a one-bedroom suite, Inspector. Not an ordinary room. I rang the bell several times. When there was no answer, I let myself in with my security card."

"And you could see the deceased from the doorway?"

"No, sir. She's in the bedroom."

"How could you be sure the woman was deceased? Did you check for vital signs?"

"There isn't any doubt she's dead, Inspector. Go in and see for yourself." Keshar clamped his mouth shut and seemed to struggle for control.

"What did you do after you confirmed the presence of the deceased?"

"I got out of there, you can bet. I made sure the door was locked, then I went downstairs to Mr. Barwell's office."

"You didn't just call him?"

"No, I went right down to his office. I guess I could have telephoned from somewhere, but that just didn't seem like the right thing to do."

"I called the police as soon as Ramesh told me about this, Inspector," the manager cut in. "We waited for the officers at the concierge desk and then brought them directly up here."

Tay continued ignoring the manager. "Who is the room registered to?" he asked the security man.

"They haven't told you?"

"Told me what?"

“About the room. The registration.”

“No.”

“Ah, I see.” The security man hesitated, cleared his throat unnecessarily, and then he plunged ahead quickly. “There is none.”

“You’re saying you’ve lost the registration information for this room?”

“No, that wouldn’t be possible. I mean the suite isn’t registered to anyone. This suite is empty.”

Tay glanced toward the door to room 2608. “Apparently not.”

“Yes,” the security man nodded. “Apparently not.”

“When was it last occupied? At least as far as you know.”

“Not for some time. A week or so?” The security man glanced at the manager, who nodded. “Something like that. I can get you the exact date.”

“And the name and address of the last occupant.”

“Yes, Inspector, of course.”

Tay pursed his lips and thought for a moment while everyone waited in respectful silence.

“Sergeant, put patrolmen at all the lifts. The stairs, too. No one except our people on this floor until I tell you otherwise.”

“Inspector,” the manager spoke up, “there are nine guests staying on this level and they will have to—”

“Yes, we’ll need a list of them along with all their registration information. Also a list of everyone else who has checked out but may have stayed on this floor any time within the past week.”

“Naturally, Inspector. But as for the guests who are on this floor now—”

“You’ll have to make other arrangements for them. Sergeant Kang will get a patrolman to accompany each of them back into their rooms to retrieve their personal belongings as soon as possible.”

“I see.”

The manager didn’t see, of course, but he was smart enough to recognize there was no point in arguing with Tay.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Tay said. "If you will wait downstairs in your offices, either Sergeant Kang or I will be down shortly to talk to you further."

Keshar looked for a moment as if he was about to say something else, but then he merely nodded. The manager, however, was less reticent.

"I am completely at your service, Inspector, as are all the members of my staff," he said in his most sincere voice. "This is a terrible thing. Terrible. And we want to do everything we can to help you bring whoever did this horrible thing to justice. Of course, at the same time, we naturally would prefer that the hotel's involvement in this unpleasantness be kept to the absolute minimum and we hope you will do your best to help us to accomplish that end."

Tay hardly thought it worth the effort to point out that a hotel with a murdered woman lying in a presumably unoccupied suite was about as involved in unpleasantness as it was ever going to get. Instead, he just held out his hand to Keshar.

"May I have your passkey, please?"

"Of course, Inspector."

The security man fished a plastic card out of his pocket and handed it to Tay, who turned it over several times and examined it with evident curiosity.

"We have electronic locks rather than mechanical ones, Inspector. The way they work is—"

"I know how they work," Tay interrupted. "I'm a policeman, not an idiot."

Keshar looked embarrassed. "I didn't mean..."

Tay waved him into silence and turned to the patrolman standing in the room's doorway.

"Take these men downstairs, Officer. Then stay with the maid who found the body until either Sergeant Kang or I come down to interview her. Make certain she doesn't talk to anyone until then."

"Yes, sir." The patrolman saluted and spread his arms as if to

herd the three men away.

“Now wait, Inspector.” The manager stood his ground for a moment. “I really do think we ought—”

“Thank you for your cooperation, sir. Someone will talk with you downstairs. Please return to your office now.”

The manager puffed out his cheeks and bounced on his toes for a moment. He looked as if he might be about to say something else, but then he just gave a little shrug and allowed the patrolman to shoo him away along with the other two men.

Sergeant Kang followed them to the elevators and watched until the door closed; then he organized the other patrolmen on the scene to seal off the floor. When he returned to 2608, Tay was standing in the corridor exactly where Kang had left him. Kang would have sworn that Tay had never moved a muscle the whole time he was gone, and perhaps he hadn't.

“Right, sir. The floor is closed off. Anything else?”

Tay took a deep breath and tugged at his right earlobe. He said nothing.

The Forensic Management Branch would have been dispatched by now, Kang knew. Perhaps their van full of equipment was even in the driveway twenty-six floors below.

“Do you want to go in now, sir, or wait for FMB?”

When Tay still said nothing, Sergeant Kang shifted his weight from one foot to another and waited. The silence stretched on with no end in sight and eventually Kang spoke again.

“I think, sir, that we might—”

“I don't give a shit what you think, Sergeant,” Tay snapped. Almost as soon as the words were out Tay wiped an open hand across his face and sighed heavily.

“I'm sorry, Robbie.”

“It's all right, sir.”

“No, it's not. I'm sorry. Really.”

“Not to worry, sir.”

“Is the boss here yet?”

“Not yet, sir. But I'm sure he will be shortly.”

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Tay nodded several times, apparently more to himself than to Kang, then rubbed absentmindedly at his face again.

“Okay, Sergeant,” he said after a few moments of silence. “Let’s find out what we’ve got.”

“Right, sir.”

Tay slid the security man’s card into the slot in the lock with two fingers, taking care not to touch the mechanism. A tiny light above the slot switched from red to green and there was an audible click. Using only the knuckles of his left hand, Tay pushed at the door to 2608.

It swung open without a sound.

3

TAY'S first impression, however incongruous it might have seemed when he thought about it later, was of the view. It was dazzling.

The drapes in the living room were open and the suite's big windows offered an unobstructed panorama all the way south to the Straits of Singapore. Hundreds of cargo ships rode at anchor on a glassy smooth sea, each waiting its turn to enter the Pasir Panjang Terminal which was presumably the largest container port in the world. Tay had never really been certain whether it really was the largest in the world or whether that was just local boasting, but then he had never really cared much either.

Off to the right, the towers of the financial district marked the entrance to the Singapore River where, in simpler times, wharves had lined the banks and fleets of flat-bottomed barges called bumboats had ferried cargos of rice, rubber, and tin to ships moored out in the Straits. Somewhere along the way the bumboats had been swapped for steel containers and the wharves for cranes and the traffic had started running in the other direction. Instead of taking out rice, rubber, and tin, cargo ships calling in Singapore now brought in Sony PlayStations, Samsung flat screen TVs, and Apple iPhones. That, Tay supposed, was what people meant when they talked about progress.

In front of the windows was an L-shaped seating area with a couch and a chair, both upholstered in some kind of nubby, dark green fabric. There were also two side tables, two lamps with heavy brass bases, and a coffee table with a thick, oval-shaped glass top. On the right was a light-colored wooden desk that matched the end tables, and on the left was a large cabinet with a television set inside it, an old-fashioned-looking model with its cables coiled haphazardly into a corner. The furniture was tired-looking and didn't really seem to fit the room. The carpet was worn and had several burns and stains as well as a big wrinkle across it. The drapes were made of some kind of heavy, neutral-colored fabric and looked as if they could use a good cleaning.

The whole effect, Tay thought, was slightly shabby. Certainly not what he would have expected a suite in a five-star hotel to look like, but then he supposed he really hadn't seen all that many suites in five-star hotels, so what did he know? After all, he reminded himself this was just a Marriott, not the Four Seasons. Maybe the hotels where everyday business travelers stayed always looked like this.

Without stepping into the room Tay squatted and examined the carpet. He placed his hand flat against it. It was dry to the touch and when he lifted his hand and sniffed his palm there was no odor. He raised his eyes and scanned the room. It looked normal enough. No furniture shoved around, no tables tipped over, nothing pushed to the floor.

Tay raised his head and tasted the air. It was cold. Someone had set the air-conditioning very low. And there was death in it. The rancid, raw meat odor of blood mixed with the stink of urine and feces. It was a smell like no other he had ever known.

When Tay stood up, his knees creaked loudly. Sergeant Kang was behind him and Tay wondered to himself if Kang had heard. Yes, of course he'd heard, but then what difference did it make? Would Robbie be surprised that he was starting to creak at the joints? Would he somehow be disappointed in Tay for starting to turn into an old man? No, of course he wouldn't. What a lot of

nonsense it was even to think about it.

Tay handed Kang the security card he had used to open the door. "Return this when you go downstairs please, Sergeant."

Kang nodded quickly, a single jerk of his head, and slipped the card into his shirt pocket.

Across the living room a door was ajar. Tay assumed it led to the bedroom where the security man said he had found the body. Watching carefully where he placed his feet, he crossed the suite.

The door was a little more than half open, but the room beyond was dark and Tay could make out almost nothing inside. He nudged the door with his elbow and in the light from the living room window saw a light switch to the right of the door. He used the side of his hand to flip it up and two bedside lamps flared to life.

Tay looked away. If he had not, he knew he would have vomited then and there.

It was worse than he expected. Much worse. Later he would say it was the worst he had ever seen, and he thought he had seen more than any man should have to see.

The woman lay spread-eagled on the room's king-sized bed. Her head and shoulders were held upright by two pillows and her legs pointed to the doorway where Tay was standing. They were open at an unnatural angle. The woman's face appeared to be looking straight at Tay, or it would have been if she had a face. It was crushed beyond recognition.

Tay breathed slowly in and out and tried desperately to bring himself under control. His mouth was drier than he could ever remember it. He tried to swallow, but couldn't. A few more breaths, he told himself, just take a few more breaths, slow and deep. Gather the moisture in your throat. Roll it around. Take your time.

WHEN he thought he might be ready to try again, little by little he moved his eyes back to the bed.

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The woman was nude. Her body was slim and appeared to be fit and toned, but it looked as if she was still in the rigid stage of rigor mortis so it was difficult to be sure. Her skin might once have been tanned, but now it was gray, except around her hips and buttocks and at the bottom of her legs where Tay could see the dusky purple lividity where stagnated blood had accumulated. It struck Tay there was remarkably little blood anywhere around her on the bed.

Where the woman's face had been there was nothing now but a dark mass of tissue spread out in a coagulated lump like a tray of ground meat in a supermarket display case. The light from the bedside lamp glistened off patches of white bone shining through raw flesh and her swollen tongue, bitten half through, hung from where Tay assumed her mouth must have once been. The woman's hair had been deep brown or even black, and clumps of it were stuck into the matted tissue like soiled straw spread on a garage floor to mop up oil stains.

The body had been posed after the woman was murdered. There was no doubt of that. Her hands were neatly folded beneath her breasts and her legs were spread open at a freakish angle. Something between them flashed in the light and in spite of himself Tay looked more closely. There was a metallic object of some sort protruding from the darker mass of the woman's pubic hair.

For a moment Tay did not know what it was; and then he did.

He was looking, he realized all at once, at the rear end of the barrel of a chrome-colored flashlight. The rest of the flashlight, at least six inches of it beginning with the lens, had been pushed up the woman's vagina.

"Oh, bloody hell," Tay heard Sergeant Kang whisper from behind him. "Shit, oh shit, shit, shit."

Tay said nothing. He was fighting too hard to control his nausea.

INSPECTOR Tay and Sergeant Kang were waiting outside in the corridor when the Forensic Management Branch arrived. There were three men, two wearing black vests over their sport shirts with *FORENSIC* on the back in white letters. The third man wore a short-sleeved white shirt with a dark striped tie. Each of them carried a small aluminum case and a black cloth duffel bag.

The man with the tie stopped in front of Tay. "Ready for us?"

Tay's face was pale and he was leaning against the wall as if it were holding him upright. He just grunted and waved toward the open door. The man nodded and said nothing. One glance at Tay told him all he needed to know.

The three men organized their bags into a neat row just outside the door to the room. One of them produced paper shoe bags and a box of latex gloves, and Tay and Kang watched silently as all three slipped the protective coverings over their hands and feet. The shoe bags were white, but the gloves were bright red and they struck Tay as looking unreasonably cheery.

The man with the tie squatted just outside the open door and surveyed the room's interior while the two men in black vests leaned over his shoulders and did the same thing. They stayed like that for quite a while, whispering a few words to each other now and then, but they kept their voices low and Tay and Kang couldn't make out what they were saying. For his part, Tay was just as happy he couldn't.

Tay had gone twenty-nine days without smoking a cigarette. That was his longest streak to date by a good bit, but he had no doubt it was over now. He had a headache and he would have given a month's pay for a cigarette right that minute. Just one fucking cigarette. Was that too much to ask? He didn't even care what brand it was. He'd take anything.

Kang didn't smoke, so he wasn't going to be any help, and leaving the crime scene to go and buy a pack of cigarettes was too unseemly an act to contemplate seriously. Or maybe it wasn't.

Tay was still trying to decide when he saw the Officer in Charge of CID-SIS coming down the corridor. Deputy

Superintendent of Police Goh Kim Leng stopped directly in front of Tay and looked him over carefully.

"Is it that bad?" he asked.

Tay didn't reply.

"Yes, sir," Kang responded instead. "It is."

Goh had a full head of thick, silver hair that men half his age regarded with envy, and he habitually wore dark, gold-rimmed sunglasses. He was of medium height, but looked shorter because of his broad shoulders, barrel chest, and thick, heavily muscled neck.

"You sure you're okay, Sam?" he asked again.

"Yes, sir," Tay nodded carefully, trying not to make his headache any worse. "I'm just great, sir."

"You don't look so great."

"Thank you, Chief."

The OC didn't smoke or Tay would have goddamn well asked him for a cigarette. He doubted any policeman in the history of the Singapore Police Force had ever before asked a senior officer for a cigarette, but the truth of it was that he really didn't give a rat's ass right at that moment. Christ, was he the only man in Singapore who still smoked? Yes, he thought he probably was.

"I'd better have a look," the OC said as he leaned into the hotel room and glanced around. "You coming, Sam?"

"I'll be right out here, Chief," Tay said.

Tay and Kang waited in the corridor while the OC went into room 2608. Kang chewed absentmindedly at a hangnail while Tay passed the time envisioning himself smoking a Marlboro. He sharpened his memory as much as he could and tried to conjure up the taste of the nicotine and the edge he felt as it entered his bloodstream and rushed to his brain. It didn't work.

Fuck this Zen shit, Tay thought. He didn't care what anyone said. He was going downstairs to buy some cigarettes and he was going to do it right now.

But before Tay could will himself into motion, a grim-faced OC emerged from the room, leaned against the wall, and folded

his arms.

“Do we know who she is?” he asked.

“Not yet.” Tay struggled to control his nicotine fit by studying the swirling patterns in the wine-red carpet. “The hotel doesn’t have anyone registered in the room. According to their records, it ought to be empty.”

The OC’s mouth tightened into a thin, hard line. “The FMB says they got clean prints. If she’s local, we’ll know who she is within a half-hour. If she’s not, we’ll compare the visitor entry records with the exits and see who’s unaccounted for. We should get an ID pretty quickly.”

Tay’s eyes shifted slightly at that and the OC caught it.

“What is it, Sam?”

“Somehow I have the feeling it isn’t going to be that easy, Chief.”

“No,” the OC shook his head slowly, “maybe it won’t be.”

Tay looked off to his left as if a repository of constructive thought lay somewhere down the corridor, but he didn’t say anything else.

“What about the security cameras?” the OC asked.

“I’ve asked for copies of the tapes from all the hotel’s cameras for the last three days,” Kang answered.

That was news to Tay, so he listened carefully.

“We’ll look at them,” Kang continued, “but I think finding anything useful is a long shot, sir. The state of the deceased leaves us without an identifiable face to look for, and there’s an international electronics trade fair going on now. The traffic in and out of the hotel would have been very heavy. Unless this woman really stands out for some reason, I doubt we’ll see anything that might help us.”

The OC let out a long, tired sigh. “I want you to stay with this until it’s done, Sam. It’s going to scare the hell out of a lot of people.”

“It certainly scares the hell out of me, Chief.”

“You and Sergeant Kang drop everything else until this case is

cleared. Tell me what you need and you'll get it. Just wrap it up and do it quickly."

"What about the press, sir?" Kang asked.

The OC looked momentarily puzzled. "What press?"

"At least two hotel employees have seen the body. Rumors are probably spreading already."

The OC looked at Tay. "What do you think, Sam?"

Tay made a vague movement with his head that could have meant anything. "I'll take care of it," he said. "I'll have a word with Public Affairs and get them to put out something vague. If they handle it right, we can probably keep *The Straits Times* out of it until we have something concrete."

"What about the other papers?"

"They won't be a problem," Tay said. "They never are."

Kang grunted and both the OC and Tay looked at him.

"You disagree, Sergeant?" the OC asked.

"Not exactly, sir. I was just thinking...well, what about the foreign press? It seems to me this is the kind of thing that could easily be blown out of proportion."

"And what would you say the proper proportion *is*, Sergeant?" Tay snapped before the OC could respond. "When you find a woman with her face beaten in who's been stripped naked and had a flashlight jammed up her private parts, how would you fix the proper proportions for that, Sergeant? I'd really like to know."

"What I meant, sir, was—"

"That murdered women in five-star hotels might damage the tourist trade?"

"No, sir." Kang cleared his throat. "That something like this might damage the country's image in general, sir. Foreigners being killed in luxury hotels here in Singapore and all. It makes us look like some Third World shithole."

"Why do you think the woman's a foreigner?"

"Well, because..."

Kang saw the trap he was falling into and trailed off into an

embarrassed silence. He looked down at his hands as if he wanted to make certain that none of his fingers were missing.

“You didn’t mean to say foreigner at all, did you, Sergeant?”

Kang had hoped Tay would let it go. Clearly he wasn’t.

“You meant to say ‘white,’ didn’t you? You meant to say white people being killed in luxury hotels isn’t good for Singapore’s image, didn’t you, Sergeant?”

Kang shifted his weight and jammed his hands deep into his pockets. He didn’t even try to answer Tay’s question. He had said far too much already.

“Don’t worry about it, Sergeant,” the OC said after a few moments passed in an uncomfortable silence. “Go on downstairs and finish the interviews.”

Kang nodded and walked quickly away. The OC pushed himself off the wall.

“Fix this, Sam,” he said. “I’m depending on you.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll do my best.”

“Do better than that. Do whatever you have to. Just fucking fix it.”

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