

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

The dream rose like an old friend's voice on the phone. Our riverboat, stolen from retirement, its engine drowned and the hull one slow leak, was sinking by the stern. We drifted downstream with the current. I stood on the open deck in the bows; Zainab balanced barefoot above me, her heels on the edge of the upper deck, holding on to the railing behind. It was night. I don't remember there being a moon. It was the end of the monsoon and the river was high. We'd reached Phnom Penh, the smallest capital city I've ever seen, and the lights of the French colonial waterfront on the Mekong's muddy tributary passed by to starboard.

An arm waved over the water—one of our party had already abandoned ship—and a calm voice informed us that the stern was now awash. On cue the bow tilted and I lunged for support; I looked back as the river, now finally gaining speed, advanced towards me up the main deck.

Zainab shouted, not with alarm but with happiness, as if this were the highpoint of some party, or the successful climax of an adventure: 'Every man for himself!' She let go the rail, raised her arms, and sprang in an arched dive into the river.

It was typically spontaneous. I hung back, hesitated, then dived in after her, into the ink-black water. . . .

... and awoke clenching the sheet.

The dream was always the same: a remembrance of reality—but only a fragment, and only up to a point. I always awoke at the

same moment. Isn't waking supposed to bring relief? The afternoon sun bathed my hotel room; cloudy bright, warm, full of life. But waking from this dream brought only numbness, a sense of absence: as if I were still numb from that ink-black water, or from something I'd forgotten, the answer to a question, maybe ... or the question itself?

I swung my legs down, letting inertia pull me off the bed. I picked up my watch. It was later than I thought: past three in the afternoon. I padded in my bare feet over the scuffed parquet to the sliding glass door leading to the balcony, and looked out at the Tonlé Sap four floors below. The river, a tributary of the Mekong, was low and mud-brown. A ferry receded in the distance; near to shore an inland tanker, its deck nearly awash, chugged upriver in a river without a current, carrying oil or gas north to Siem Reap. It was June, the beginning of the monsoon season, and the Tonlé Sap, for months flowing south, had stopped for a day before reversing and flowing north. Puffy cumulus clouds filled half the sky; soon they would combine and the downpour begin. I slid the glass door open and breathed in the humid air. Scents rose from the hotel garden below me; I recognized the odour of frangipani. The smell brought back a memory: a young Cambodian woman, Lim Sovan, Zainab's maid, telling me with absolute seriousness that in the countryside, spirits dwelt in the frangipani trees. Her voice was almost too soft to hear and her diction astray, but a sense of familiarity came through: for her, spirits in the trees were as natural as birds in the air. They just weren't as harmless.

I'd arrived at 6 a.m. on Friday, after twenty-six hours of air travel and layovers, from Washington to Seoul to Phnom Penh. It was seven by the time I checked into the Himawari Hotel, and I'd gone directly to bed. It was not the correct thing to do. To alleviate jet-lag you should try to stay up the first day, try to get into a regular schedule. But I was wrecked. And I had no pressing business. The embassy wouldn't expect me to check in until Monday morning.

I shuffled back inside and stood under the shower with the tap turned on full. After that I pulled on some clothes, made coffee in the little kitchen and took it back out to the balcony. I lit the first cigarette

of the day. It was an old vice, and nowadays a private one, but it was a reminder of the past and a comfort.

When the State Department asked me to resume my assignment in Cambodia I'd agreed. Washington wanted to make it clear to the government—meaning the Prime Minister, the archetypal Asian strong man who made all the big decisions—that he couldn't get away with kicking out American diplomats: they'd just return. I had my own reasons for going back.

Six months in Washington had frayed my memory of Phnom Penh. The psychologist I'd seen (it was the department's mandatory post-trauma policy) wanted me to let go of anything that made for unhappiness. He told me that it was old-fashioned to see happiness as a result: happiness was a goal, a life goal, a goal to which we should all aspire, even claim as a right. I didn't buy it. It sounded like feel-good psychology to me—the stuff you read in women's magazines in dentists' waiting rooms (the advice column, written by Doctor Bob—or some such name—with a photo of the doctor: a young, well-dressed man with an open, vacant smile). Sometimes you want to hold on to something even if it is painful. Trying to forget your mistakes, your failures, other people's pain, only denatures memory, poisons it by degrees. If happiness meant forgetting—then I'd choose something less than happiness.

So I'd come back to recall the past. To revive memory, what I recalled and what I'd forgotten, maybe even questions I'd forgotten. Maybe I'd find some answers I never knew.

I hoped I wasn't too late. It's easy to revisit the past in the developed, western world. Change is slow, even resisted. What noticeable alteration can six months bring, to Los Angeles, London, Toronto, Paris? Asia's different. A year is enough to refashion the skyline, and if most of your friends were there on six-month to two-year contracts, then the landscape of acquaintance will be refashioned, too.

The Cambodian elections, the demonstrations and assassinations, were all history. My colleagues in Washington pointed to jerky videos on YouTube the way an archaeologist holds up a shard (I didn't need the evidence—I'd been involved); but how could those

smudged images compete with the cranes raising the city's second skyscraper, or the work crews widening the airport boulevard? The price of oil was going up again, there was hunger in the provinces and more poverty in the capital, but business was booming and the election campaign had been too short to disrupt the tourist trade. I was certain the hostess bars a couple blocks west of the riverside hotels were still open, probably doing better than ever. I mention them as an indicator of economic activity. I work for the State Department, but am by profession an economist.

Between drags on my cigarette I breathed in the humidity and the scents rising from the garden. A flag flapped as a breeze rose and brought with it the faint stink of sewage. Maybe it was the mixture of scents and odour on the air that made me think of those bars (I only ever visited them on business), their curious mixture of vice and innocence, of ambivalence, both moral and practical. Who, in each transaction, would turn out to be the victim—or the greater victim? The recollection contrasted so utterly with the sterility of my hotel. No matter how tawdry the bars, they weren't as tawdry as my room, a room with zero individuality or atmosphere, where the only evidence of humanity was scuffs on the parquet floor and scars on the rosewood furniture, a 'luxury' room that could have been anywhere, in any luxury hotel anywhere in the world.

I hadn't come all this way, from Washington to Phnom Penh, for sterility. The afternoon was already advanced, but a few hours of daylight remained. I picked up my wallet and my keys and headed for the lift.

The Himawari was the first luxury hotel built in Phnom Penh after the Khmer Rouge, and the usual place for the US Embassy to put its temporary duty assignment personnel and its newly arrived permanent staff. At check-in it looked unchanged from my previous tour: a circular driveway leading to an open-air reception and lobby, a sofa and chairs and a central atrium. But as soon as I emerged from the lift I saw and heard what I'd missed that morning: a grand piano. Perhaps a move by management to bring the lobby closer to a Beijing or Hanoi standard. A Cambodian woman pianist (she must have been either a returned American emigrant or the product of one of the artier

NGOs), was playing Bach. I'm not even remotely musical, but I recognized the piece—a Goldberg canon—because Zainab had played and explained it for me.

Of course it was just coincidence. I don't believe in some higher being ordering such things for our edification or enlightenment or direction. Coincidence exists. The only person ultimately responsible for our lives' order or disorder is ourselves. We have to make our own order if our life is to have any meaning at all—other than evidence of just another throw of the dice. But sometimes a happy chance gives us a clue, shows us the way. And at that moment I saw the place in memory to begin my search for what I'd forgotten and for what I never knew: where it all started: a classical concert at the British Ambassador's Christmas party, at his residence, a year and a half ago.

I strode through the lobby and down the curving drive to the street. The Friday afternoon traffic up Sisowath Quay was heavy, with more cars than I remembered pushing their way through the sea of motorcycles. A cab would be conspicuous and diplomats aren't supposed to ride on the back of motorcycles. So I decided on a tuk-tuk, a motorcycle-drawn, aluminium-framed rickshaw. There were always a few waiting for custom in front of the hotel; out of the four drivers who gave me a hail I picked the one who looked most careful, told him, 'Wat Preah Keo,' and climbed in.

He drove me to the nearby landmark and I directed him from there. The residence was only a few blocks from the hotel—nothing's far in Phnom Penh. I stepped out onto a tree-lined pavement in an older, high-class residential neighbourhood. Tall concrete walls lined both sides of the road. The slanting sun flashed off a brass plate; I crossed the street to read it and make sure. It was still the residence, but the guardhouse stood empty and one side of the double gate hung ajar. I looked around. No one in sight. The street held the silence that in Asian cities only privilege buys. I pulled the gate further open and slipped through.

A driveway without a car wound to the right; beyond the driveway stretched a lawn and garden. A cement walk led ahead along the side of the house to the front stairs. Opposite the stairs a

veranda ended in a swimming pool. Cans of paint littered the poolside and the top of a ladder leaned against its rim—the pool was dry. The painters were gone, maybe on a mid-afternoon break ... a break that, without supervision, had extended. I walked to the pool but saw no one and no sign of anyone at home. Very likely a guard loitered somewhere on the premises. Loitered or slept, stretched out flat under a tree.

A wave of irritation swept over me: what a failure of security! At an ambassador's residence! A familiar tide of anger, one of the bouts of fury that engulfed me daily for months (and that I thought I was getting over) rose again. My fists clenched. My eyes stared but I was only half aware of what I looked at, or even where I was. I wanted to fight back, to strike out—at whom, at what? These episodes of rage were divorced from what appeared to initiate them. I got a grip. The sane part of my brain pulled the handle back. I came down. I took a breath and looked around, reorienting myself. The heat rose from the cracked poolside veranda and the sun beat down on my head. I retreated to the shade of the front porch and sat on the stairs.

I thought: the security failed then, too—when it all started, right here on these steps. It was the early evening instead of the afternoon. I'd been standing, not sitting on the stairs, and water filled the pool. Christmas lights wound around the side of the house and party lights hung from the trees in the garden. I'd stood alone, looking out at the scene. Then, too, the grounds lay empty apart from me, but the house was packed with guests. It was the British Ambassador's Christmas party, and it began with a full programme of classical Christmas music, presented by a local expat amateur singing group: the Phnom Penh Players.

It was that excruciating music—that and the nicotine habit—that brought Zainab and I together. We both needed a smoke and we both needed to escape from the Japanese Ambassador's wife singing *Laudamus Te*. I dislike Latin church music; Zainab disliked the performance. Looking back, it was my first example of her finer discrimination—I use the word in its older sense. I didn't know she'd followed me out. The rainy season was past, the sky was clear and

black, and the pool lights and Christmas and garden lights lit up the tropical night. I'd just pulled out my cigarettes when a young man in a neat grey English-cut suit leapt up the stairs, his arm held out like a spear. It was either take his hand or jump out of the way. I took it.

'We apologize, mister ambassador,' he said breathlessly (his wife, behind him, was panting), 'for being so late. The street's blocked off ... the demonstration. . . .'

I'm American, not British. It's true I worked in the American Embassy in Phnom Penh, but not near the level of Chief of Mission. I saw no reason to delay him with the facts. He was on a trajectory. I said, in as neutral an accent as I could, 'Quite all right. Please go in.' Nodding and muttering thanks, he withdrew his hand without stopping and sidled through the half-open front door. His young wife followed, dropping the hint of a curtsy as she passed. She must have been even more confused than her husband, investing my imagined position with the status of royalty.

They were still singing the Latin Christmas song inside and I thought it best to light up before another interruption. I had the cigarette out of its pack when I heard behind me a smothered laugh, and then a woman's voice: 'Impersonating the British Ambassador is a serious offence.'

I turned around. From the accent I expected one of those upper-crust, refined, bloodless Brits. Instead, I saw a tall, slender black woman in her mid-thirties. She had a long, triangular face, with eyes wide apart, an aquiline nose and a square but narrow chin. She had thick black hair but a hairline so high it was almost receding. I said she was black, but her complexion was lighter than Nigerian, more chocolate brown. Her shoulders were square and her upper arms full—features I've always found attractive. She stood ramrod straight. Her lips parted wide in a frank, open smile that her eyes agreed with. It was infectious. I smiled back and said, 'Only if it's premeditated.'

'Can I bum a smoke? I left mine at home.'

'Certainly.' So we both lit up, companions in a minor escape and a minor vice.

She said, ‘Your suit and tie confused them. The invitation said “relaxed formal”. That usually means an open-necked shirt and sports jacket.’

‘Except for the ambassador himself.’

‘Yes, especially if he’s British. And you may have looked a little bored, too. Most diplomatic duties are boring, but you can’t let on in public. Looking bored in a private moment probably looked very believable. Why didn’t you correct them?’

‘I didn’t like to embarrass the young man in front of his wife.’

She looked at me and smiled again, but with less humour. ‘Yes, you’re right. It would have been unkind. It was a little white lie—you kept them in the dark—but it was good karma.’

I was brought up in the Midwest and worked most of my life in New York, on Wall Street. ‘Karma’ and so on was never part of my vocabulary—my economic speciality was technical analysis. But she evidently meant it as a compliment.

We introduced ourselves the way expats do. In two minutes we had the other’s name, job, time in-country and marital status. Michael Smith, American diplomat, economics officer at the US Embassy. New in-country and relatively new in-service, just finishing my second month in Cambodia, my second assignment. Zainab Ambler, British dependent spouse (her expression, formally correct and spoken with an amused grimace), wife of Robert Ambler, British diplomat in Phnom Penh. Their third posting together.

She had the manner of a securely married woman: self-confident, relaxed, agreeable. The kind of woman you can spend time with without right away considering the possibility of an affair. I’d recently emerged from one, from my previous posting, an affair that had, emotionally, spun badly out of control—on her part. I didn’t mind the idea of a short break from sex, and was not looking for an emotional entanglement. Zainab was companionable, as we smoked and chatted on the porch, and I cast a sidelong glance at her modest wedding ring with approval.

So I felt regret when we finished our cigarettes and she said, ‘The next piece is by Vivaldi. I’ve heard them rehearse it and they’re

not bad. The conductor's a friend of mine. I should show her my support.'

'I'll go in with you.'

We turned back to the door but she stopped and said, 'Didn't that young man say something about a demonstration?'

I tried to remember. 'He mentioned a roadblock ... it was an excuse. It looked quiet enough when I arrived.'

It wasn't quiet inside. The Phnom Penh Players sang the Vivaldi, a joyous Christmas piece, for all they were worth. From the foyer we peeked into the main reception room. Its chandeliers glittered over a wall-to-wall crowd. The musicians stood in a tight clump, as if for safety, at the far end; Zainab and I would never be able to squeeze much further in than the door. A wave of locker-room sweat drifted out and hit me in the face. I've never been a fan of male locker rooms. I turned around, and noticed a door ajar across the foyer. I put my hand on Zainab's arm—I think that was the first time I touched her—and said, 'It's hot. The drink table's over there. Want to see if there's anything left?'

She only hesitated a second.

The bottles on the table were all empty but the punch bowl was still half full. Next to the punch stood a well-dressed Khmer man, talking to a short, slightly built western woman. They leaned in to each other, the man bending over a little, his head down; she held her head back, looking up. Their postures suggested intimacy, or at least warmth. It was a scene it looked a pity to disturb. But Zainab led the way. She knew both of them. After I poured a couple of glasses, she introduced us.

Hun Prang was a politician, the leader of the Reform Party. Speaking to Zainab, his manner changed to professional courtesy as fast as throwing a switch. I put him in his late thirties. He had the physical stature and sleek look that identified the Cambodians of his generation who as children had escaped the killing fields and made it to the States or Europe. Now back home in Phnom Penh, they stood out. They were physically larger than Cambodians their same age, who as children had suffered hunger—from malnutrition to semi-starvation. When Zainab introduced me as an American diplomat, he

grabbed my hand and pumped it, telling me in an American accent that he was acquainted with my Deputy Chief of Mission, Noelle McQuiston. ‘She’s well informed,’ he said, with an ingratiating smile; he seemed to have a separate tone for each of us. ‘She’s interested in local politics and supportive of my party. She believes strongly in the reform process.’

The ‘reform process’ was an NGO, aid agency and embassy mantra. There were several others, all on the same lines. The Cambodian government was rated the second most corrupt in Asia, and one of the most corrupt in the world. Hun Prang had probably been mentioned in one of the embassy’s weekly political briefings, which I had to attend, but I didn’t immediately recall him. There are clean politicians in the developing world, but in my experience they are thin on the ground. I thought Mr Hun (the Cambodians, like the Chinese, put their family names first), might be clean—he had been brought up in America. But I thought it more likely he was self-delusional.

I was about to say something anodyne—even minor diplomats aren’t supposed to stick their neck out in public—when he said, ‘Probably you already know that I have hired Mrs Ambler’s NGO to assist my campaign.’

Zainab interrupted: ‘It’s not “my” NGO. I just work there.’

I said, ‘No, she hadn’t told me; we just met.’

‘Then I’m pleased to tell you now. She will be my personal consultant. Her former career in the media will be invaluable, and she is an expert on transparency issues.’

It didn’t sound like the description of a dependent spouse. I threw her an interrogatory glance but she just smiled and looked away. Mr Hun laid his hand lightly on the young woman’s shoulder, and said, ‘Deria is also helping, as an independent journalist. She’s writing an article now, about my new party, for several American and European newspapers and magazines.’

The shoulder dipped slightly as the young woman promptly said, ‘But I can’t guarantee any of them will print it.’ She sounded as if she’d repeated the message more than once, and still wasn’t sure it was getting through. Zainab had introduced Deria Goldstein as a

journalist from New York. I had not previously met, in my brief career as a US Foreign Service Officer, any American journalists abroad. There are few left. The American newspapers and television networks have closed down most of their foreign bureaus. So I had no one to whom I could compare Deria. Her appearance was not prepossessing. Childhood malnutrition seemed unlikely for a New Yorker, so I assumed anorexia. Her hips were narrow and her chest flat; her sleeveless top displayed thin, unmuscular arms. Her hair needed a shampoo. Her expression looked almost simple, until you noticed the guarded cunning in her eyes. She emanated sexuality. The overall impression was louche.

She went on: 'I might be able to place something. An American candidate for Cambodian Prime Minister—and Harvard trained. It's a good hook.'

'Yes,' he said enthusiastically. 'We need international press, well before the elections. We need to put the elections on the international map.'

Zainab started to say something, but we'd forgotten the music. It had ended. The door swung open. A heavy-set, middle-aged Englishman in a navy blue blazer and a white open-necked shirt stepped in, took one look at the empty bottles, and asked, 'That punch?' Mr Hun assured him it was. The words weren't out of his mouth before the Brit barrelled past Zainab and picked up the ladle. Two other members of the audience appeared and made a beeline for the punch bowl. In another moment the trickle became a flood. Mr Hun and Deria disappeared behind a fresh wave; Zainab gave me a panicked look, a lone chocolate-brown face among the white scum. I pushed through, grabbed her arm and pulled her against the tide through the door, across the foyer and out the main entrance.

We were back where we'd started, on the front porch.

'Thanks for saving me,' she said wryly.

'Forget it.' And then we stopped and stared, at first not understanding, not alarmed.

A young Cambodian man ran across the lawn from the main gate towards the house. He must have come from the street. He ran a few paces then stopped, looked back and around, apparently uncertain

or confused; then ran again a few strides. He continued this halting progression until he reached the pool. The sight of it stopped him dead—he couldn't go further without swimming. It seemed to give him confidence: he looked across the veranda at Zainab and me, still on the front porch, and waved and smiled.

We didn't wave back. Two more men, similar to the first, ran through the gate towards the house.

'Hello,' an English voice said, 'what's this, then?' It was the Brit from the punch bowl. Away from the scrum he gave the appearance, with his blazer and open-necked shirt and glass of punch, of a professional man gone slightly to seed.

'We don't know,' I told him. 'They just appeared.'

The newcomers joined the first. A fourth brought up the rear. The group by the pool shouted among themselves, one pointing to us, another pointing towards the gate.

Then two plainclothes police appeared. That's who I assumed they were. They could have been any Cambodian men on the street, except for their truncheons and a determined focus on doing harm—a focus apparent in the way they moved. Cambodians tend to be pacific, gentle people. But there was nothing pacific or gentle about these two. They sprinted like two disciplined football players on the same team towards the laggard on the lawn. I doubt he had a chance but when he stopped and turned that was it. He managed another couple of strides before they were on him. In a one-two movement the pursuer on his left took a swing at his ass, and as the man's head jerked back, the other swung his truncheon forward to meet his skull. We heard the crack across the lawn. It was then I noticed the truncheons were lengths of pipe.

The man crumpled in a heap on the immaculately mown grass.

The brutality shocked, revolted us. We could hardly believe our eyes. This was a Christmas party at the British Ambassador's residence in Phnom Penh, the peaceful capital of a peaceful country. I lived in New York City for more than a decade, but its era of casual crime was over before I got there. I'd never seen such violence.

Two other men with pipes came sprinting across the manicured grass. The four of them joined up and headed toward the pool.

‘The fuckers,’ the Brit said.

‘What’s going on?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know. But we’ve got to stop this.’

He started down the front stairs, and then stopped as he realized he still held a punch glass. He laid it on the banister and struck out purposely across the veranda. Although badly outnumbered he looked resolute. I don’t believe the assailants—I now doubted they were cops—were yet aware of us. I was very aware of standing with Zainab, hanging back, while the only other male westerner pressed forward alone.

But I could have done nothing for the unarmed men at the pool. It was over before the Englishman got halfway there. Two lay on the ground, broken; one tread water in the deep end while the men with pipes looked on. Maybe they couldn’t swim. I heard our man in the blazer shout something. I think that was when they became aware there were *Barang* around—the Khmer word for any white foreigner, but literally meaning ‘French’, a holdover from their colonial days.

I doubt we looked impressive. A couple of white foreigners, one out of shape and belligerent, one hanging back, and an African woman. And the Cambodians with their blood lust up. So they went on the attack.

Two of them ran towards the Brit, but at the last moment swerved away on each side. I thought they’d decided to run past him, but it was a feint: as they passed, one swung his weapon against the back of the Englishman’s knee. He went down bellowing in pain. The two Cambodians didn’t break their stride. They ran straight towards us, swinging their weapons, their faces set hard and blank as masks.

I was certainly afraid. But I’m temperamentally opposed to turning and running, even, probably, when I should. On the other hand I’m not half-witted. I backed up towards the door, taking Zainab with me by her hand; she seemed almost paralysed.

Then the second Brit appeared.

We learned later that he was the ambassador’s personal security detail, in other words, his bodyguard. He’d been biding his time among some trees bordering the veranda, observing, sizing things up.

He made a dash across the veranda so fast the Cambodians didn't take in what was happening. Neither did we. In a moment he had one man down in a running tackle, then in a vicious headlock. Leaving him motionless on the ground, he bounced back on his feet like a jack-in-the-box, the pipe in his hand.

He wasn't more than thirty or thirty-five feet away. He turned to me and yelled, 'Take it!' and threw the pipe low in the air so it hit the ground with a bang just in front of the porch, just in front of me. I hesitated for a second. Then I released Zainab's hand, ran down the stairs and picked up the weapon. God knows what I must have looked like to the Cambodian facing me in the middle of the veranda. I was at least a foot taller, and trimmer than the westerner he'd brought down; without thinking of it, I made the most of my advantage by holding the pipe high.

The bodyguard saw me as an adequate deterrent—or at least the best he could hope for under the circumstances; he started running in a slight crouch to the Cambodians still by the pool. There were two of us and three of them. I was armed and the Brit didn't seem to need a weapon.

And like that it was over. They turned and ran.

I felt an extraordinary rush. The guard knelt by the downed Englishman, who looked conscious although still on his back. I ran to them and told the guard, 'Thanks, thanks for your help.'

He looked up and said, calmly, 'You can lower your weapon now.'

I still held the pipe over my head. I lowered it and asked if there was anything I could do. He didn't answer at first, he was speaking to someone on his cell in acronyms I didn't understand. Then he said I could help him get the injured man into his apartment.

We pulled him up. He was heavy, clearly in pain, and could use only one leg. He swore softly but continuously as we half carried him, limping, around the house and through a modest door into a sitting room. We laid him down on a sofa. He told us he was a doctor and instructed us to put a pillow under his bad knee. That seemed to make him more comfortable. The bodyguard said that an ambulance was on the way, and then introduced himself: his name was Scott

Simmonds. He had a quiet, well-mannered voice and one of those English accents that an American can understand without strain. I could see him properly under the overhead light: he was of medium height, wiry and muscular. He looked my age. I learned later he was older—but fitter. He told me, not as if he were apologizing, but rather as if he were explaining the justifiable use of means that were normally deplorable: ‘I had to use violence. They used it first, on their own, then on one of us. I had to stop them.’

If there had been an American cop around with an assault rifle, I’m sure he would have used it without a second’s thought. I said, ‘It was fine with me. You did what you had to do. It worked.’

He said, ‘The embassy detail’s on the way. They’ll secure the area. Now I have to brief the ambassador, and tell him the party’s over. There’s going to be a mass exodus. You’d better get out first.’

I returned the way I came, back to the porch. Zainab was where I’d left her, holding tight to the railing. It was still intermission and people were beginning to spill out of the house; a couple holding drinks stood behind her. I walked up and put my hand on her arm. ‘How are you?’ I asked.

‘Fine,’ she said with a quick, tense smile. ‘I hadn’t realized economic officers were so aggressive.’

‘We’re not.’

‘You look pumped-up.’

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I said, ‘The guard told me we’d better go—the ambassador’s going to announce that the party’s over. Now’s our chance to get out before the rush. We’d better find your husband.’

‘He’s at home, nursing a broken leg.’

‘Did you drive?’

‘I took a tuk-tuk.’

It was probably safe enough, but it was already a night of strange incidents. I said, ‘I drove. If you like, I can give you a lift.’

‘I’d like that very much.’

Halfway to the gate, she said, ‘Wait. I want to thank that man.’

‘His name’s Simmonds. He said was going to brief the ambassador. I’m not sure we have time. . . .’

‘Where’d you leave him?’

‘In his apartment. It’s at the back of the residence.’

‘He might still be there. It’ll only take a moment. Come on.’

So we went back. I didn’t notice that the body we’d left on the lawn was gone. As we walked past some trees at the rear of the building, I heard a sound I couldn’t identify, followed by a gasp or groan. I reached out and took Zainab’s arm, and we slowly edged around a thick trunk.

It was Simmonds, kicking the hell out of the Cambodian. He must have dragged him back while we were walking to the gate. The man lay on his side, curled up. Simmonds stood over him. He aimed his kicks unhurriedly, methodically. Before each kick he backed off a few paces, enough space for a short run-up, as if it were rugby practice. We saw him kick twice, once to the man’s face, once to his ribcage. Then I pulled Zainab back. Simmonds never saw us.

We resumed our walk to the gate. I said, ‘I’m sorry you saw that.’

She didn’t reply.

I continued, ‘I’m surprised. He didn’t look the brutal type.’

She said, ‘I hope he kills him.’

I glanced at her. Her face was set, but not in a frown; there was a hint of a grim smile. And suddenly it struck me as a gutsy thing, a real thing, to say, ripping away that politically correct, maybe even morally correct veil that’s supposed to hold us back, keep us on a civilized path. An assailant heading towards you, a sawn-off pipe in his hand, his blood lust up, meaning violent harm—who wouldn’t want him, at the least, disabled? She’d seen four unarmed men brutally beaten for no apparent reason; wasn’t it normal to want to see the assailant permanently out of the picture?

The truth is we were both high. The kind of high you get when you’re involved in a sudden, violent crisis or accident—especially if it’s suddenly, violently overcome. I couldn’t realize then how out of character was her remark. I was high enough myself to admire it.

She gave me directions to her place. I was still new to town and needed to be told where to make a left, where a right. She directed me south on Norodom Boulevard, to the east side of what we

called the ‘expat ghetto’. A good area, where rents were still cheap enough for the obscurer embassies—the Bulgarian, Swedish, Myanmar missions. I was too busy navigating the traffic for small talk. The passing scene—the hundreds of motorcycles, many with whole families crammed onto them, passing so close they seemed to hang from my car like fish on a shark; the occasional moto-drawn farm cart, overflowing with produce, on its way to a local market; the courting couples standing chastely close in the light of the waterworks surrounding the Independence Monument—seemed to me more vivid, brighter, than usual.

Just past Wat Thann she had me turn off the boulevard into a narrow alley squeezed by concrete walls topped with barbed wire; it was like a maze, turning right, then left, then left again, until we emerged into one of those quiet, back roads that still exist hidden away all over Phnom Penh. The usual walls ran along both sides. She told me to stop outside a large green double gate. A guard box stood empty. There was no traffic.

I asked her, ‘Where’s your gate guard?’

‘Who knows. They’re Cambodian—the embassy hires a contractor. We’re short of staff: we lost our housemaid-cook. But the house guard should be here.’ We got out and she knocked quietly on the metal gate. No one answered. She knocked again, louder. And again.

I said, ‘He’s gone, too?’

She reached down and inserted her hand through a tiny rectangular opening, struggled for a minute, then managed to slip the bolt. She pulled out her hand and pushed the gate open enough to pass through.

I followed her.

We stood on a cement driveway that ran straight to a two-storey house. A single light burned on an upstairs terrace. A long lawn and garden stretched ahead on our right, ending at the house; it was too dark to discern much detail, but a wave of denser humidity, a smell of the jungle, suggested the garden was overgrown.

She said, ‘Welcome to the House of Usher.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Poe. I call it that because it’s so big, and so empty.’

Stray light from the road spilled over the wall behind us onto an open hut for the house guard. We peered inside. Other than a neatly made bed, a chair and a table the hut stood empty. ‘They’re all gone,’ she said. ‘So much for contractors.’

‘I’d better walk you to the house.’

‘There’s no need. Robert’s a light sleeper; with his leg cast, a very light sleeper. We don’t want to wake him.’

‘Don’t you think it odd, both your guards missing?’

‘No. It’s happened before. It’s just coincidence.’

I almost didn’t want it to be coincidence. We were both still tense, still high. Our blood was up more than we knew.

Neither of us made a move to leave, her to her house, me to my car; we just stood there in the doorway of the hut, next to each other. She turned a little away and murmured, ‘I’d better go.’

I didn’t say anything. I reached out my hand to her back, the small of her back, just a little caress, hardly even that, but something—we’d been through a lot together in a very short time. By accident, I caressed her ass. It felt rounded and tight under her dress.

She swung round and kissed me awkwardly in the dark, her lips hitting the corner of my mouth. The tip of her tongue skated across my cheek. We grabbed each other. I pulled her inside the hut. I turned her around, facing the bed, and unzipped her dress. She bent over and we made love then and there, with our clothes half on and half off.

I write ‘made love’; some would call it aggressive fucking. But there’s more than one way to make love—although I wasn’t yet thinking of an affair. The signs were already there: the opposites that attract, the similar responses, the things in the other to admire. And chemistry, of course. But I only saw them in hindsight. Like the first signs of a fatal illness, the ones you missed but should have seen, should have recognized. By the time a diagnosis is made, it’s too late to take effective measures.

Not that an earlier diagnosis would have made a difference. I wasn’t interested in a cure. I don’t think she was, either, even though love complicated her life more than mine. I don’t think she believed

in regret any more than she believed in guilt. She'd mentioned karma but only lightly, with humour. I was still ignorant of her religious convictions, that tangle of contradictions which caused so many so much trouble, through which only she saw any light.

But if (I present it as an hypothesis) one of the differences between lust and love is that in love, after the act, there's not the slightest regret—then our first sex that night in that steamy little hut was the beginning of love. I closed my eyes as we strained against each other, one of my hands cupping her breast, the other gripping her shoulder, as her ass pressed into me. I closed my eyes ...

... and opened them, a year and a half later, as my tuk-tuk pulled up in front of the same green gate set in the same compound wall. Just as before it was dusk and the narrow guardhouse stood empty. Just as before the street lay quiet, deserted, the green gate closed.

Eighteen months is a long time in Phnom Penh. There was no point now in knocking or in trying to withdraw the bolt.

You can spend too much time and go too far to reclaim memory. I felt lonely, alone. My recollections were as empty of comfort as the street was of traffic. Standing dumbly in front of that gate, I was seized with doubt. Shouldn't I be moving forward? Shouldn't I be trying to grab life, or make a life, in the present, instead of the past?

I wanted company. A flesh-and-blood woman—but safe, not threatening involvement. At least, not emotional involvement. And then I remembered Ann. She was part of the past, too, but she'd be nostalgia-lite: a professional companion who'd slip into the desired mood, preferring comfort and surface talk to emotional depth. I wouldn't mind that. She was a trained confidante, trained at keeping secrets—much more difficult than people realize. If I caught her alone, no one would ever know we'd met ... or spent the night. She was always attractive and always lonely. A night with her would entail the minimum of emotional commitment and emotional damage. To both of us. Maybe she'd bring me back into the here and now.

She should still be around. She'd arrived in-country just before me, and Agency assignments tend to run in parallel with State. Ann was what they now called a Core Collector Operations Officer. It sounds faintly geological, but in fact it's the Agency's latest euphemism for 'spy'.

I climbed back into my tuk-tuk, and told the driver, 'Norodom.' When we emerged from the alley, I directed him to cross the street, deeper into the expat ghetto.