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THE RAIN TREE

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She currently lives in Thailand with her husband and mangy *soi* dog, Jai Dii.

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*Once again, for my daughters,
Zena, Emma and Hanni.
With love and thanks for all
your ideas, help and encouragement.*

1

Koh Keo Island, Thailand
August 2004

Officer Arunchit squatted in the dappled shade of a coconut palm. He drew deeply on a half-smoked cigarette, sighing nervously with the exhalation. He wasn't really sure where to begin, having never had any hands-on experience in these matters. He knew the police procedure, in theory. He'd certainly studied it, but he'd never had to deal with it for real, not on the island. Nothing like this had ever happened here. A few backpackers with dope, the odd domestic dispute, or a disgruntled tourist objecting to paying the national park entrance fee were the only problems he'd encountered in his short career. Nothing like this.

Finishing his cigarette with one final drag, he stood upright, tossed the stub into the wet sand and tucked the skintight shirt of his uniform neatly back into his waistband. He heaved another sigh. He had a bad feeling about all this.

The body reclined awkwardly, half sitting, half lying, virtually out of public sight in a tiny, hidden cove between the rocks at the foot of the headland. Its legs and thighs floated oddly in several inches of seawater that had been stranded in a rocky basin by the outgoing tide. Had it not been for an inquisitive swimmer, the body might have gone unnoticed altogether, at least for a while. Slumped against a large boulder, its startled expression had already been covered by a thin sarong. Arunchit had been having tea with Keng's grandmother at the Rain Tree Guesthouse—something he often did during the

quiet of the afternoon—when the telephone call had come from HQ. The old woman had immediately abandoned her refreshment and ambled into the guesthouse to get the sarong. She'd thrust it into his hand, kissing him solidly on the cheek as he set off on his motorbike to the next bay in response to the call. But she had always been a practical woman, sensitive too. 'Better to cover it,' she'd said. 'So upsetting for everyone.'

Arunchit picked his way through the scattering of loose stones on the beach, slowly approaching the colourful mound where a national park security guard stood watch. The guard turned to Arunchit at the sound of crunching footsteps.

'We should put tape around this area, shouldn't we, sir? When this gets out, we'll have tourists crawling all over the place with their cameras, don't you think?'

Arunchit didn't answer. He needed to think all right, and quickly. He also needed to have a look at the body, a close look, just to convince himself. He hoped that his instincts were wrong. Gently pulling down a corner of the sarong, he winced imperceptibly at the dark marks around the victim's throat and the bruises circling one of the inert, open eyes. He shivered. Oh God, no! he thought, swallowing hard as he tried to force the contents of his stomach back down his oesophagus and willing himself not to vomit. He pulled the sarong further down to expose the victim's hands which were resting lightly, palms down, on the chest. He leaned forward, catching his breath as he spotted blood around and underneath several nails which had once been well groomed but were now raggedly broken.

He cleared his throat in an attempt to dislodge the knot that suddenly constricted it, and stood up.

'I think you should go back to HQ and get some tape,' he said, responding to the park warden's earlier suggestion and sounding far more confident than he felt. 'You're right, we do need to cordon this area off until Lieutenant Promsuk arrives from the mainland.'

Arunchit looked around briefly, watching the retreating figure of the park warden set off in the direction of HQ. He squatted, turning

his attention back to the body. Carefully covering his own fingers with the edge of the sarong, he lifted each of the victim's swollen hands in turn and swished them briskly in the pool of warm water that lay under its thighs and buttocks. He did it deftly and with little disturbance to the body. When he was satisfied, he covered the corpse again and sat down on the sand to wait. He ran his hands through his hair, scratching at his scalp repeatedly, suddenly aware of the sweat filming his palms. He fumbled in his pocket, withdrew a pack of cigarettes, extracted one and lit it with trembling fingers. This was turning out to be a very bad day.

2

North Yorkshire, England
November 2000

Tom's radio crackled into life.
'Tango Victor 1249. This is Yankee Control. Do you receive?
Over.'

'Tango Victor 1249 receiving. Over.'

'We have a suspected intruder at 16 Meadow Croft Lane.'

'Roger, Yankee Control. I'm in the area. I'll check it out. Over.'

Tom glanced at his watch. It was eight o'clock in the evening. He was five hours into his shift, driving around saturated lanes, checking evacuated homes, his concern growing with continued reports from Communications of rising waters in the already brimming rivers.

'Come on, lads,' he said to the dogs. 'Just what we need on a night like this.'

The rain lashed down onto Tom's windscreen as he turned the van around towards Helperby. The A1 and the A19 were flooded. Northallerton, Ripon and Thirsk were already underwater. The city of York was bracing itself for the worst flooding in living memory. Most units were working flat out, helping with the evacuation of over three thousand homes. Tom, reluctantly changing direction, swiped his palm across the interior of the windscreen. It didn't help much. Most of the area's streetlights were dysfunctional, making visibility extremely poor.

Alert and restless, sensing the tension in the darkness of the damp van, the dogs waited.

'What a bloody night to pick for a burglary,' Tom addressed them again. 'Bastard!' Four ears pricked up. 'Let's get him, lads.'

Max snarled from his secure pen. The huge, black German Shepherd transferred his pent-up tension to Jade, a small, male Spaniel, making him bark with excitement from the confinement of his separate cage. But Jade wouldn't be working tonight. This one was Max's job. Max was a highly trained tracker and a long-serving member of the dog unit. Working alongside Tom for nearly six years, he was a first-rate, general-purpose dog. Obedient and loyal beyond reproach, he could detect a scent up to six hours old, diligently searching, keeping his head low and his senses alert. He was flawlessly conditioned and superbly honed. His training was precisely managed. After twenty years experience with seven different dogs, Sergeant Tom Judson was a competent, highly respected professional. Max knew the score. He understood that his treasured toy and his master's praise would be his reward at the end of a successful search. He worked tirelessly for Tom, his devotion to his boss unconditional. They were a tight team.

The van turned a sharp right into Meadow Croft Lane, causing the dogs to fall against the metal sides of their enclosures with a hefty bump.

'Sorry, lads,' Tom said to reassure them and himself. 'Bit bloody dark round here, ay, and flippin' freezing. Could do with a cup of tea and a log fire, never mind chasing round after some scumbag.' Max snarled at the sound of the word, his hackles rising as he instinctively sensed impending action. Tom stopped the van outside number sixteen. It was in darkness. The place looked deserted. He kitted up by tucking black combats into heavy-duty boots, slipping body armour over his jacket, and checking automatically that his cuffs, metal baton and CS gas were safely in his belt. Then he grabbed his torch and headed out into the cold towards a flicker of candlelight that was illuminating the steamed-up window of the house next door.

‘Ay, lad,’ explained the elderly male neighbour. ‘I heard this glass breaking at about half past seven. Then I saw this figure climbing in through ’et broken window like, wearing one of those ... you know ... hooded coats. Pale colour it was. So I called you lot. Didn’t do nought like. Too bloody scared like. Don’t want me head kicked in, do I? I never saw him leave neither. Too bloody dark like, what with power cuts an’ all. Probably long scarpered by now. Would you like a cup o’ tea, lad?’

‘Cheers, Mr Braithwaite, I’d love one but I’d best get going—see if I can find the tyke. Lock your doors now and get them sandbags round your front step. Floods are forecast for the whole area if it keeps raining.’

The neighbour chuckled. ‘Ay, lad. I think I’d best start building an ark at this rate. Never seen it this bad afore. You tek care now, lad.’

Tom returned to the van. Picking up Max’s harness, he opened the back doors, setting the big dog free. Jade jumped up and down, yapping, tail wagging, waiting for the command and anxious to be included in the action. Tom ruffled his head fondly.

‘Sorry, lad, not your turn tonight.’

Slipping the harness over Max’s head, Tom fastened it securely around the dog’s sturdy shoulders. He pulled the harness sharply upwards, attaching the line and holding the slack in a big loop, the action triggering Max instantly into tracking mode. The dog lowered his head and neck, his keen nose already on the sodden ground, searching excitedly for any recently laid scent.

Tom locked the van and followed Max towards the empty house. He began shining his torch beam in a wide arc before letting it rest on a broken window at the rear of the property. Max stopped. Tom tried the back door. Finding it open, he tentatively stepped inside. He scanned the kitchen area, shining a beam of torchlight across the walls, floor and ceiling.

‘I have a dog.’ His voice echoed in the deserted room. ‘I advise you to give up.’

Silence. Tom waited before moving cautiously to the second ground-floor room. Drawers and cupboards had been emptied, their contents scattered in disarray over the carpet. Max snuffled, snout low, as Tom continued his search of the property. Upstairs were more ransacked drawers, the intruder for some reason having failed to notice a laptop computer, which lay undisturbed at the bottom of an open wardrobe.

Amateur, thought Tom.

Returning to the garden and the shattered glass, he lowered his hand to the ground and made a forward sweeping gesture with his fingers.

‘Go seek, lad.’

Max sniffed eagerly, circling the area around the broken window before veering left across the lawn towards a hedge at the end of the garden. He was keen.

Tom jogged to keep up. He was tall, heavily built and, at forty-six, fitter than most younger men. He constantly exercised which enabled him to easily match the dog’s pace.

Max was onto something. A strong, recent scent drove him on through a gap in the hedge and into a copse behind the small housing estate. He continued along a public footpath through the woods, and paused briefly by a log pile stacked beside the dismantled railway line. Max began circling, his sensitive snout filtering out the woody smells, searching for the newly familiar scent. Tom caught his breath for a second.

Abruptly, leaping in front of them, momentarily startling both man and dog, a hooded figure materialised from out of the darkness. Then as fast as it had appeared, the lithe body bolted, sprinting as swiftly as an athlete along the disused railway track towards Helperby. Tom grabbed his radio with his free hand as Max yanked him forward in pursuit of the fading figure.

‘This is Tango Victor 1249.’

‘Yankee Control receiving.’

‘Request support unit for foot chase. Location is old railway

line behind Spring Woods. Suspect heading towards Helperby.’ Tom ran hard, spluttering the details to Communications between short, heaving breaths. ‘Suspect is small build, fast, wearing pale-coloured, hooded jacket. Turning now, northerly direction, on footpath towards Thornton Bridge. Over.’

‘Roger, Tango Victor 1249. Will mobilise support unit to your location. Over.’

In the gloom the beam from the torch, diffused by the lashing rain, was barely adequate. Tom lost sight of the suspect. Max also became hesitant, slowing down, circling on the spot, the downpour a hindrance and masking the trail.

‘Bugger!’ Tom cursed. He was away from the protection of the trees now, struggling to see as a deluge blew directly into his unprotected eyes. ‘Where is he, lad?’ Tom encouraged Max.

The dog picked up the trail once more, pulling his soaked, tired master forwards and downwards along a sloping track leading to the river. Suddenly he stopped intuitively. He was ill at ease, puzzled. From somewhere ahead of them in the murky blackness came a sound like a roaring surge of water. Reaching the edge of the bridge, Tom could just make out the tops of the arches that supported the road over the River Swale. The bulk of the structure had disappeared under the torrent.

Tom squinted, momentarily stunned. Max snarled, straining at the harness. Tom held the line tight. Directly ahead, facing the semi-submerged bridge, stood the hooded figure. He was hesitant, unsure of his next move, frozen. Tom shouted above the terrible roar.

‘I have a dog. I advise you to give up.’

The hooded figure turned towards the voice, its features slowly taking form in the faint beam of Tom’s torch. A young man, perhaps sixteen or so, blinked in the light, panic filling his eyes. Tom shouted again, calmer this time, appealing to him.

‘I have a dog, lad. Come on now, stand still.’

Tom waited as several seconds felt like eternity. He was quietly confident that the chase was over and took one step towards the young

man. On his second step the figure turned, making an impulsive dash for the bridge, the rising water swirling around his ankles, then his knees. He made no sound. Lunging forward, straining at the harness and knowing instinctively what was coming next, Max waited for the line to be unhooked.

‘Hold him.’ Tom unfastened the line.

Max sprang at the boy, leaping effortlessly through the air for several metres. He came down fast and hard, clamping massive jaws around the suspect’s arm a split second before the roaring of the river intensified.

Suddenly the banks yielded, cascading the Swale’s contents over the town’s flood levies. Tom watched in horror as Max, faultlessly obedient, held onto the young man. He watched as both were immediately swept off their feet, caught in the deadly swell and instantly out of sight and earshot.

Above the turbulence of the rising river, staggering blindly through the rain, up the footpath towards the flashing blue light, Tom’s voice was audible.

Sinking heavily to his knees, Max’s line still in his hands and looped at his chest, he let out a pitiful wail.

‘NOOO!’