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The Merry Misogynist

Written by Colin Cotterill

Published by Quercus

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THE MERRY MISOGYNIST

Colin Cotterill

Quercus

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FORM A223-79Q

ATTENTION: Judge Haeng Somboun
C/O: Department of Justice,
People's Democratic Republic of Laos

FROM: Dr Siri Paiboun

RE: National Coroner

DATE: 13/6/1976

RESUME:

1904 Plus or minus a year - years didn't have such clear boundaries in those days. Born in Khamuan Province, purportedly to Hmong parents. I don't recall it myself.

1908 Whisked off to live with a wicked aunt.

1914 Dumped in a temple in Savanaketh and left to the will of the Lord Buddha.

1920 Graduate from the temple high school. No great feat.

1921 Buddha investment pays off: shipped to Paris by kindly French sponsor intent on making something of me. The French make me start high school all over again just to prove it wasn't a fluke the first time.

1928 Enrol at Ancienne Medical School.

1931 Meet and marry Bouasawan in Paris and join the Communist Party for a lark.

1934 Begin internship at Hotel Dieu Hospital. Decide I might want to become a doctor after all.

1939 Return to Laos.

1940 Frolic in the jungles of Laos and Vietnam. Reassemble broken soldiers and avoid bombs.

1975 Come to Vientiane hoping for a peaceful retirement.

1976 Kidnapped by the Party and appointed national coroner. (I often weep at the thought of the great honour bestowed upon me.)

Sincerely,

Dr Siri Paiboun

1

FIVE DEAD WIVES

By the time the calendar pages had flipped around to 1978, Vientiane, the capital of the People's Democratic Republic of Laos, had become a dour place to live. The fun had been squeezed out of it like the hard-to-come-by juice of a durian. It was flat and colourless and starting to feel sorry for itself.

The novice socialist administration that had ousted the six-hundred-year-old monarchy was starting to realize its résumé didn't match the job description. In the two years since taking over the country the prime minister had survived four assassination attempts. The army was moonlighting in timber exports and Pathet Lao troops were black-marketing petrol. A new class had been added to those sent to the north for re-education: corrupt socialist officials.

The numbers told the tale. The per-capita income was less than ninety US dollars, and over a hundred thousand people had already fled the city to try their luck in the Thai refugee camps across the Mekhong. Eighty-five per cent of those remaining in the country were subsistence farmers yet for the first time in its history Laos had resorted to importing rice. An unprecedented drought the previous year had resulted in the Department of Agriculture's

predicting a famine for '78. It appeared even the Lord Buddha had deserted his flock. Decrees had been passed limiting private commerce but that hadn't made a lot of difference as there was hardly any money to spend. The five hundred million dollars pumped into the city by the US imperialists during the Vietnam War had well and truly dried up. The expressions on the faces of the people who lived in the quiet capital city advertised the city's joylessness. In fact, on March 11 of that year, there were only two truly happy men in the entire country.

One was seventy-three, soon to be seventy-four-year-old Dr Siri Paiboun, the national coroner. It was astounding that a man so ancient, with so much bad karma tallied up against him, had been able to find any joy at all. Two years earlier, his dream of retirement had been bullied out of him and he had been designated the country's only medical examiner. It was the nadir of a lifetime of unfortunate decisions: decades of trying to understand his own Communist Party, decades of marriage to a woman too focused on revolution to start the family he craved, decades of putting together soldiers broken from the countless battles of a never-ending civil war. What was one more unwanted job after a litany such as that?

But then, as if by a belated good fate, widower Siri had been reunited with Madame Daeng, the freedom fighter, still pretty at sixty-six, still carrying a torch for her silver-haired doctor. The couple had tumbled head over heels in love and, just two months earlier, they had married. The honeymoon showed no signs of abating and the smile hadn't left the coroner's lips since.

The other truly happy person on that steamy March day was the man who some knew as Phan. He'd just done away

with his fifth wife and, as usual, nobody was any the wiser. How could a man not be overjoyed at such success?

'Are you Dr Siri?'

'Yes.'

'Dr Siri Paiboun?'

'Yes.'

'The coroner?'

'Three out of three; you win a coconut.'

'You have to come with me.'

Siri stood at the foot of the stairs that led to the upper floor of Madame Daeng's noodle shop on Fa Ngum Street. He wore only a pair of Muay Thai boxing shorts and a crust of sleepy dust. His thick white hair was tousled and his eyes puffy. He hadn't planned on being awake before eight and it was only a quarter past six. Daeng had gone down to set up for the morning noodle rush and had responded to the loud knocking at the shutters. She had checked the man's credentials before rousing her hungover husband. Even though Siri was only 153 centimetres in his sandals he still managed to rise half a head above the intruder in the slate grey safari suit.

'Who are you?' Siri asked.

'Is this your place of abode?'

'Has anybody told you that answering questions with questions inevitably leads to your vanishing up your own—?'

'Siri!' Madame Daeng caught him just in time. It was unwise to rile a bureaucrat, even a very small one. Both men looked up when she pulled back the double shutters to give the Mekhong River a better view of the inside of her shop. The early sunlight glittered on the water like a shoal of day

stars. A solitary fisherman rowed his boat against the current and seemed to be travelling backwards – perhaps more than seemed.

'As I told your…as I told the comrade,' the man said, 'I am Koomki from the Department of Housing Allocation.'

Siri's stomach clenched. Somewhere deep down he'd been expecting this visit. He backed up two steps and sat down on the bare wood. Daeng had begun to prepare the ingredients for the day's *feu* noodle soup at the rear of the shop.

'Dr Siri,' Koomki continued, 'we have an inconsistency in our files.'

'And what would that be?' Siri asked as if he didn't know.

'You, Comrade.'

'Madame Daeng,' Siri called to his wife, 'did you hear that? I'm an inconsistency.'

'That's why I married you, sweetness.'

The man from housing blushed.

'I think you'll realize soon enough that this is hardly a joking matter,' Koomki said. 'Is this your place of abode or not?'

Siri resented Koomki's tone. 'No.'

'You're standing here naked but for a pair of shorts and this lady is clearly your wife—'

'Oh, no, I'm not,' Daeng interrupted.

'Not his wife?'

'Not a lady.'

The man was plainly out of his depth with this couple. He held up his clipboard to his damp bulgy eyes and read from it. 'Dr Siri, you are registered as the householder of allocated government accommodation unit 22B742 at That Luang.'

'Then that's obviously where I live,' Siri assured him.

'Well, it's clear to our department that although there are a number of people living in that bungalow, you are not among them.'

'And what's your definition of living?' Siri asked.

'I…er…'

'I assume you have one?'

'It's…it's the place where you sleep.'

'Really? So insomniacs would never qualify for government housing?'

'What?'

'You have to admit our government's causing us a lot of sleepless nights. In fact, I'd wager most people aren't sleeping at all. I do have a bed on which to lay my head at my house but when I find myself wanting at two a.m., I climb on my motorcycle and come here to find a little rest.'

'Or to the house of one of his mistresses,' Madame Daeng added.

'Quite.' Siri nodded.

Koomki turned to Daeng, who was smiling broadly beside the hearth. The steam from her broth curled around her face and filled the occupants of the room with a wanton desire to eat. The stomach of the man from Housing growled.

'Comrade,' he said to Madame Daeng, 'I warn you that lying to a government cadre is a very serious offence.'

'Honestly, I barely see him,' she said with an earnest look in her eyes. 'As you'll know from your files there's only me registered here. Of course, I do have other paramours popping in from time to time.'

Siri smiled and scratched the tingle where his left earlobe used to be.

Koomki seemed to realize that he was having the mickey taken out of him. As he didn't have humour to fall back on, he resorted to regulations.

'Comrades, according to the rules, you are not allowed to sublet government housing. Thanks to the benevolence of the republic, you are given permission to remain in your house rent free. As soon as you desert it, you forfeit the right to reside there. You certainly may not rent it out.'

Siri nodded. 'Well, then there's no problem, is there?'

'Why not?'

'Because, a, as we've established, I do live there, and b, none of the people in my house pay rent. They're my friends.'

'Your friends?' The man laughed for the first time. 'Then you're a very popular man, Dr Siri.'

'Thank you.'

'Yesterday I counted nineteen people coming to and going from the That Luang residence. Eight of them have registered your house as their official domicile. There was also a monk who we have no record of at all. What's a monk doing at your house, Comrade?'

'He's my spiritual adviser. You know, like when the prime minister's wife sneaks off to the temple to ask about fortuitous dates for staging national events?'

'Then I suggest he's advising you subliminally because he would appear to be deaf and dumb. He seemed unable or unwilling to tell me to which temple he is attached. And we all know that monks are not permitted to stay in private housing. Which brings me to the question of prostitution.'

Siri raised his bushy white eyebrows and turned to his wife. 'Do we know any questions of prostitution, my dear?'

'The question "How much?" springs to mind,' she replied.

The Housing man was getting more and more flustered and the scent of Daeng's noodles was very seductive.

'The question refers to two young women residing at your house who have criminal records for engaging in prostitution.'

'Tsk, tsk, and they're plying their trade from my house?'

'Not exactly.'

'That's similar to "no", isn't it?'

'We are still investigating that charge. It's one of the reasons I've been sent here to fetch you. We have a hearing scheduled for you at seven thirty.'

'Am I under arrest?' Siri stood and held out his wrists.

'Well, no. I'm not a—'

'Because if I'm not under arrest and if you don't have at least four burly thugs waiting outside to haul me away, it looks like you're going to have to conduct your little trial without me.'

'That isn't an option, Comrade.' The man's voice was beginning to crack. He fumbled through the sheets on his board. 'I have a summons here signed by the director of Housing.'

'Oh, then that's different.' Siri nodded. 'Could I get a better look at that?'

Koomki held it out and, in one smooth sweeping movement, unexpected in a man of his age, Siri grasped the sheet in his hand and was halfway across the shop. Daeng took a step back. Siri folded the paper neatly before placing it on the earthenware hearth in which burned a merry fire. It crumpled to black within seconds. Where the mouth of the man from Housing had previously been, there was now a large gaping hole.

'And, if you'll excuse me,' Siri said, wiping his hands, 'I intend to have a little breakfast before heading off to work.'

The man seemed unable to move. 'That was government property,' he managed finally.

Siri went over to Koomki, put his arm around him, and led him to the front of the shop.

'You blatantly destroyed government property,' the man stammered in case Siri hadn't heard the first time.

'Then it's an eye for an eye. You see, I am the national coroner, which makes me government property too. I am owned exclusively by the Justice Department. Yet you come here and attempt to destroy my reputation. A little slip of paper is cheap by comparison, don't you think?'

Siri had Koomki on the uneven pavement now, but before sending him on his way, Siri leaned close to the man's wet eyes and said, 'So please tell your colleagues that if they have any charges to bring against me, they should have me picked up by the police. They may then pursue my case through the courts. Otherwise, leave me alone. I'm not going to get into a panic about a couple of minor officials in an office playing pocket politburo. And if you even consider confiscating my house I'll have you up in front of the Party union representative before you can get to verse two of "The Red Flag". I've been a fully paid-up member for longer than our own prime minister. Don't forget that.'

He launched Koomki on his way and stood back. It was always good to have a little sport before breakfast. Siri laughed and took in a breath of early Vientiane. It had become a peaceful place. The only ugly sounds floated across the river: motorcycles and tape recorders, loudspeaker trucks urging people to buy plastic buckets and sweet potatoes. Somewhere, a man was shouting at his wife, sharing their family scandal with his Lao brothers and sisters. Thais weren't a race you'd ever accuse of peace and

quiet. Their televisions and radios had two adjustments on the dial: off and loud.

Madame Daeng wheeled her cart out to the pavement and joined Siri in his revelry. She put her arm around his waist.

'Poor man,' she said.

'Him or me?'

'Comrade Koomki. I don't suppose I need to tell you what you just did probably wasn't a good idea.'

'Good idea? He comes here, spying, at six o'clock on a Saturday morning to see if I'm wearing pyjamas …?'

'I know.'

'What's the country coming to? Is this what we labored in the jungles for thirty years to produce?'

'I know.'

'Bloody little bureaucrat with his clipboard and lists. If he were 50 centimetres taller I might have given him a right hook.' He showed her his right hook, and she felt his muscle. 'Even the old one-two.'

'My hero.'

They gazed at the retrograde fisherman until he turned to look at them and waved. They waved back.

'But it probably wasn't a good idea,' Siri agreed, recalling all his other dust-ups with government officials.

'Probably not. Did you know you had ladies of ill repute at your house?'

'He has to be talking about Mrs Fah's nieces.'

'She didn't mention their old career?'

'All she said was they were back from the islands. She could have meant a resort vacation for all I knew.'

'More likely the internment camps on the reservoir. But if they were released it means they've served their time. And if they were really on Don Nang with hardened criminals it

wouldn't have been a very pleasant experience. The last thing they want is nosy cadres breathing down their necks.'

'It's the last thing any of us wants. According to Fah, they both lost husbands to the war and children to disease. They're long overdue a gust of good fortune.'

'Well, they did find a kindly old gentleman to take them in off the streets. And what about your monk?'

'Comrade Noo? He did well to keep his mouth shut. If they'd found out he was Thai they'd have whisked him off to Immigration, never to be seen again.'

'Your house is getting out of control.'

'So it would appear. Since Nurse Dtui and I moved out to our respective love nests it's been hard to keep a check on who's moving in or out. I suppose I should stop by there tomorrow and do a head count.'

'I'll come with you. It's always a laugh to spend time at your house. It makes me feel…I don't know, saner.'

Phan often considered the possibility that he might have the 'everything' that other men craved: a regular job that allowed him to travel, several government letters of identification, and looks that naive country girls found interesting. And of course he had a truck. A man with a truck was somebody in Laos. With its solid double-plated frame and its growling Chinese engine, it broadcast his power. Of course he didn't own it but nobody needed to know that. Being allowed to drive a department vehicle was almost as good. He liked the way they watched him pass, the dull nowhere girls sitting on their front porches, hoping for life to come by and call for them to climb aboard. If he chanced to stop they'd almost turn pirouettes and crash face-first onto the dirt.

That power had taken control of him. It wasn't simply that

he could bed them; that was easy. Mothers sometimes brought their daughters to him and asked whether he'd like to take them for a trial run. No, it was the knowledge that he could woo a respectable girl – untouched, unsullied, saved for something special – that he could talk his way into the family home, make a seemingly genuine display of his affection, and have them all believe he was a legitimate catch.

His record had been five days: the platonic seduction, dinner with the parents, a display of credentials and bank statement, trip to the registry office in the nearest town – all before the week was over. It still amazed him how quickly he had taken possession of her. The document said she was his. All he needed was to take her maidenhead, and then her life. Was there anywhere else in the world where you could claim ownership of another human being in such a short period of time? He didn't know of it. Perhaps there was a place in Africa or South America where parents were so desperate to see their loved ones secure that they'd overlook little discrepancies, take shortcuts with paperwork.

These were desperate times. 'She had her opportunity,' they would have said. 'This nice fellow came from the city and he fell in love with her. But he was only in town for a month before his project ended. We couldn't let a chance like that go by, could we now?' All they wanted for their daughter was a good, financially secure suitor with polite manners, reasonable looks, connections with the Party…oh, and a truck would be nice.

All he required was beauty, virginity…and a long, squeezable neck.

He walked from the headman's house, where he'd secured a mattress for the night. The sun was setting behind the

grey-mauve mountains and the insects were at evensong, filling the valley with a monotone soprano. A crest of pines surrounded the village of bamboo-and-elephant-grass shanties with odd corrugated roofs. Most huts had twig fences around them and flowery borders of bougainvilleas and steamy blue convolvuli. It gave the place that nice feeling that always made Phan uncomfortable.

On his work roster this little place was classified as a town. But he'd travelled and he knew what a town should look like. Being located on a provincial main road didn't change a thing as far as he was concerned. A village was a village. Even some of the provincial capitals were no more than villages: broad, spread-out ramshackle villages with concrete blocks here and there. Villages filled with ignorant, unpleasant people who would never appreciate the finer things in life.

He nodded at householders, deliberately stopping to chat and state his business. In a hamlet this size, that news would find its way around before the evening meal. After twenty minutes of casual, hands-in-pockets strolling, he'd already come to the edge of the village. There was nothing but a dirt trail leading off into the woods up ahead. He sat beside a urine green pond where a lanky crane stood on one leg, staring back at him. A toad stirred in the grass at his feet. He eased his foot under its belly and volleyed it out into the water.

As all patient hunters learn, sitting quietly for long enough will invariably draw prey. Phan hadn't been at his post for more than ten minutes before he heard the voices of young children approaching along the dirt track. Through the reeds he could make out a dozen or so shirts of various degrees of whiteness. The children disappeared

into the long shadow of the mountain, then re-emerged, laughing and frolicking into the last of the sunlight. And with them was the perfect woman. She held books: probably a young teacher returning from school with her flock. She was slim but had full breasts. Her buttocks were shapely enough to cause her phasin *skirt to bunch a little below the belt. There was nothing worse than a woman with no arse. But her face, oh, her face was perfection, no sun damage or moles or acne scars or hairy sideburns. She would do very nicely. So soon after his last honeymoon but still he had no intention of letting up. He was insatiable.*

One of the children saw him sitting by himself by the pond and nudged her playmate. Soon, all eyes were on him, the young teacher's included. Strangers were a rarity, and well-groomed, presentable strangers might have dropped to earth from another planet. The children stopped and stared at him and were admonished by their teacher.

'Some manners, children. This isn't the zoo,' she said.

She nodded an apology to the stranger and shepherded everyone along. She would look back, he knew. How she did so would tell him whether she was married or single. A married woman would be flush with the confidence that comes from having snared a husband and consumed him. Once penetrated, a woman became a slut, soiled, easy pickings. A wife's whoring nature would inspire her to turn back with a brazen, inviting smile.

He waited. At the very last minute she turned. It was a brief, almost accidental look. Her face flushed crimson with embarrassment when she saw him looking back at her. She quickened her pace and was eaten up by the vegetation that bordered the track. But it was enough. She was his.

Insatiable and irresistible.

*

When Dr Siri arrived at Mahosot Hospital at 8:15 there was a dog asleep in his parking spot. It had to be his spot, today of all days. There was just the one place shaded by a bashful-desire tree for the hottest part of the day and he'd put his territorial marker on it in the shape of an unarmed claymore mine with his initials on it. There were twenty other empty spaces to sleep but the dog appeared to have the same criteria as the doctor. Siri beeped his horn. Nothing. He edged forward. No movement. He was considering whether to just drive on over the animal when the dog looked up. His eyes were hepatitis yellow with no visible irises.

'Saloop?'

When he was still alive, Saloop had been Siri's dog. Or perhaps it would be fairer to say that Siri had been Saloop's man. The dog had adopted Siri, saved his life once, and become a fixture in the yard of the bungalow at That Luang. Then one day he'd been murdered by the neighbour in cold blood – brained with a garden shovel.

The doctor was surprised but not shocked to see him. He'd seen worse. He had an uncomfortable relationship with the spirit world. Through no fault of his own, Siri hosted the soul of Yeh Ming, a thousand-year-old Hmong shaman. It appeared the spirit had come to rest in him following negotiations with Siri's father. He'd been too little to remember anything about it. His father had not bothered to stick around in Siri's childhood memories. For as long as he could remember, Siri had been visited in his dreams by the ghosts of departed patients. Over the past two years, those spirits had begun to slip out of his unconscious and

haunt him in his waking hours. He didn't allow them to frighten him.

Siri was certain that if he were more intelligent or a better detective, he'd be able to interpret what he was being shown. He often arrived at the eureka moment long after the fact, when the mysteries had been solved by more conventional, mundane methods. His forehead was permanently bruised and disfigured from his constant slapping at it when he realized what the spirits had been trying to tell him. Perhaps it was due to his inadequacies as a host that he had only confided his infirmity to three people: his lab nurse, Dtui; his best friend, Civilai; and his wife, Madame Daeng. They'd taken it quite well, considering. Inspector Phosy of the Central Intelligence Unit had arrived by means of a policeman's instinct at the conclusion that Siri wasn't all there. But he was not averse to a good ghost story either.

Siri had learned to observe rationally. There were times when he braved nightmares like a confident swimmer, knowing he'd end up on the bank unscathed. There were malignant ghosts like the *Phibob* of the forest who hounded Yeh Ming's spirit. They constantly hummed around him like vindictive wasps, waiting for a moment of weakness when they could sting. Had it not been for a sacred amulet at his neck, Siri would certainly not have made it to his second marriage. But the vast majority of spirits were harmless.

Siri sat on the saddle of his Triumph and shook his head as Saloop rose creakily on his dead legs. The scientist in Siri wondered what had happened to his inner cynic. He'd mocked his way through a temple education, raised a philosophical finger to the Virgin Mary while studying in Paris, and made fun of the shamans and fortune-tellers

upon his return to Asia. Perhaps this was their revenge: bringing him eyeball to eyeball with a dead dog inquiring after his health.

'How are you, boy?' he asked.

Saloop had, not surprisingly, lost his big-smiling, waggy-tailed savoir faire since he'd passed away. He scratched halfheartedly and drooled green bile. He stepped across the loose bricks and into the vegetable garden, where he started to dig. Siri decided that a filmmaker might have had trouble representing the scene. Saloop was undoubtedly digging deep into the earth but the actual dirt wasn't moving. There was no hole, yet the dog was in it. He emerged with a bone in his mouth and took one step towards Siri.

A bicycle bell sounded behind the doctor and he turned to see Dr Mut, the urologist, attempting to reach his parking spot. When Siri turned back, the dog, the bone, and the non-hole were gone.

By the time Siri entered the morgue, Nurse Dtui and Mr Geung, the lab assistant, were already at work. Siri heard their voices in the cutting room so he threw his shoulder bag on his desk and went to join them. They were standing on either side of a body. He knew it must have arrived that morning while he was convening with the dog. He'd been there till eight the previous evening, and as it was an offence to die outside office hours in Vientiane, this body wouldn't have been allowed in the morgue until eight that morning. The tobacco leaves in which it had been wrapped were on the floor beneath the table.

'Hello, my staff,' Siri said with a smile.

'G…goo…good morning, Comrade Doctor,' said Geung. No matter how many times he'd attempted it,

Geung had never once managed to get out the greeting in one breath. Down's syndrome was a bugger.

'Mr Geung, what have you done with your hair?' Siri asked. 'You look like a—'

'Like Elvis?' Dtui interrupted. Already a well-rounded girl, she was now twice her normal size, swollen with her first child. She was a country lass, born in the troubled north-east, and she'd never crossed an ocean. But she had spent a good many years with her nose buried in Thai pop magazines so she knew the world – or at least the important parts of it. Siri was a movie buff so he knew of Elvis from *Jailhouse Rock* and *G.I. Blues*.

'I was about to say a mountain goat,' he confessed. 'What have you done to him?'

'It's a fra…a fra…What is it, Dtui?' Geung asked.

'A fringe, babe,' she reminded him. 'It's our new look. I was getting sick of staring at his greasy centre parting, so we've had a bit of a makeover. I came in early and gave him a shampoo and a snip. I think he looks very handsome.'

'I…I'm gorgeous,' Geung told Siri.

'Irresistible. Let's just hope no female goats pass by the morgue,' said Siri. 'Right, who do we have here?' He took a step back and noted for the first time just how beautiful the naked corpse was. Although tastes differed, few would doubt that she had the proportions most girls dreamed of. She was around seventeen with perfect bone structure and very little excess fat. But there was something inexplicable about the condition of the body.

'Name unknown,' Dtui told him.

'Who brought her in?' he asked.

'A headman and local Central Committee man from Vang Vieng. They said the body was found yesterday

morning. They seemed in a hurry to get her here. Drove overnight.'

'What were the circumstances?'

'They wouldn't tell me. They looked a bit shell-shocked when I asked. The cadre gave me a sealed envelope for you. It's on your desk. Obviously something a lady shouldn't know.'

'I'll get ready and take a look at the note. Where are her clothes?'

'This is the way she arrived. They wrapped her in tobacco leaves for the journey to keep the smell down.'

The warning signals sounded for Siri immediately. A naked girl found dead suggested a rape. That would be reason enough for men from the country not to discuss it with a young nurse. But after reading the note he understood there was another disturbing element to the death. A local hunter camped out in the woods had heard the sound of a truck late at night. At first light he'd gone to investigate and found the victim. She was tied to a tree with ribbon. She'd been seated with her arms and legs around the trunk. There was far more to this than merely an assault. When Siri returned to the cutting room, Dtui and Geung were wearing their aprons and masks. The temperamental air conditioner on the far wall grumbled. Siri handed Dtui the note. There were no secrets in the Mahosot morgue. He could see she was disturbed by what she read.

'I don't think I'm looking forward to this,' she confessed.

But for her unplanned pregnancy by Inspector Phosy, Nurse Dtui would have been in the Eastern Bloc by now, studying to take over Siri's job. So, as was his habit, Siri called on her to make the initial appraisal of the body.

'Would that it were mine,' she began.

Geung threw her oft-quoted words back to her. 'Men like f-f-fat women,' he said.

'Can we get on with it?' Siri said impatiently, but he knew her remark had been made to disguise her discomfort.

'Sorry, Doc.'

Siri pulled up a stool and sat with his arms folded. 'All right. What do you see?' he asked.

'She must have been found pretty soon after she was killed judging by the lack of insect or animal damage to the corpse.' Dtui stepped up to the table and touched the victim's neck. 'The cause of death was strangulation.'

'How can you tell?' Siri asked.

'Bruising of the strap muscles.' She prodded at the neck. 'Probable fracture of the hyoid.'

'I agree,' Siri nodded. 'The perpetrator?'

'Man. Big hands. The thumbprint's twice the size of mine.'

'Any defensive wounds?'

'Not really. But look, she doesn't have much in the way of fingernails. They're trimmed down to nothing. If she tried to pull him off she wouldn't have left any scratches on her own neck. Don't see any other bruising apart from the big hand print on her neck.'

'I agree,' said Mr Geung, sweeping the hair out of his eyes.

Siri smiled. 'Thank you, Dr Geung.' Geung's laughter helped to lighten the darkening mood in the room.

Dtui pulled back the girl's thick hair and inspected her scalp. 'No head wounds, small mole just below her hairline above the ear.' She worked her way down the body. 'One of her fingers is broken,' Dtui continued, 'but there's no bruising so it looks like it happened post-mortem. She

might have been damaged in transit.' She leaned over the dark untrimmed mound of hair at the girl's pubis and put her hands together in apology before probing. 'No outward signs of bleeding or bruising at the vagina, thank heaven.'

She walked to the bottom of the table and looked at the girl's feet. 'This is the thing that gets me,' she said. 'Look at her pale skin. It's beautiful. No sun damage, no blemishes. It's so white, nearly opaque; it's almost as if she had a vitamin deficiency. She's like an advertisement for Camay soap. But then we come down to these creatures.'

The girl's feet and ankles were dark and rough. It was as if she were wearing grubby brown socks. The skin was sun rusted but her toenails were bleached almost pink and the soles of her feet were puckered and soft as tofu. Siri left his perch to take a look.

'You're right,' he said. 'That is most odd.'

'Any idea what could have caused it?' Dtui asked.

'Not a clue. See anything else?'

'Well' – Dtui returned to the girl's hands – 'it isn't as spectacular as the feet but look at this.'

She lifted one of the girl's arms. The back of the hand was as pristine as the rest of her, but the palm was a mass of calluses and blisters. The skin was as tough as pomelo rind.

'That's odd too,' Siri agreed. 'So far, this young lady is a compendium of contradictions. Do you see anything out of place when you compare the body with the cadre's report?'

Dtui looked at the paper again but nothing leaped out at her.

'No, I don't,' she confessed.

'The ribbon?' Siri prompted.

'No, I…wait!' She lifted the hand one more time and was

obviously annoyed with herself having missed it. 'No welts on her wrists,' she said.

'And that tells us …?'

'That she was tied up when she was unconscious, or after she'd lost the will to fight.'

'Or?'

'Or he tied her up after he'd killed her.'

'I think it's time to see whether she has any deeper secrets to tell us.'

The autopsy proceeded as usual although Siri was loath to defile such a beautiful young lady with his scalpel. She had been in very good heath. Siri envisioned a diet with little sugar or starch and a healthy supply of fruit. Photos of her lungs and liver might have graced a Department of Health THIS COULD BE YOU poster.

Up to this point it had been a strangulation case, no less horrific for its simplicity but not a difficult diagnosis. Yet murders by strangulation were almost unheard of in Laos. The ability to kill a person with bare hands was rare. Many believed if a person was holding a body when the life drained from it, that person was likely to provide a conduit for the spirit of the corpse and be haunted for eternity. For that reason, few Lao were prepared to handle the dead. Siri and his team were extraordinary in many respects. To physically squeeze the life out of another human being, the killer would have to be a peculiar type of monster. Yet even this far into the autopsy, Siri had still to learn just how evil the girl's murderer was.

They had suspected sexual assault of some kind but the absence of blood around the mons had made a closer inspection a lesser priority. They didn't have the facility to test for semen other than the senses of the eye and nose but

Siri was obliged to take samples. It was obvious as soon as he began the examination of her vagina that the opening and surrounding flesh must have been thoroughly cleaned. He looked up at Dtui, who involuntarily took a step backward. There was evidence of severe trauma deep in the vaginal passage, evidence that the membrane of the hymen had been newly ruptured, and then—

Siri heard a gasp emerge from his own lips. He looked up to see Dtui cover her mouth and run from the room. Mr Geung had held his ground but his eyes were full of tears. Both he and Siri stood looking in disbelief. Buried deep inside the girl was a black stone pestle. It must have been inserted while she was still alive. The silence in the morgue was broken by Geung, who was sobbing uncontrollably. 'This is v…v…very bad.'

'Yes, Geung. It is very bad indeed.'

Siri's own emotions did not show in his light green eyes or in his voice. But inside himself he felt a terrible rage that wrung his stomach muscles. He immediately promised himself that he would not leave the earth until the perpetrator of this heinous crime had been dealt with in equal measure. This death was not the result of an inevitable act of war; it was not the destruction of an enemy. It was the cruel and sadistic defilement of a beautiful young woman for reasons that a soldier or a nurse or a reluctant coroner could never begin to understand.

When Dtui returned to the table her angry eyes were bloodshot and her cheeks damp. She had nothing to say. She put on an unsoiled mask and stepped up to the table. Siri had removed the pestle and placed it on a stainless steel tray.

'We'll need to take a look at the stomach contents,' Siri told her. 'The girl must have been drugged in some way.

There were no contusions or abrasions on the thighs or labia so I don't think she put up a fight. She was either unconscious or paralyzed and unable to resist. Given the nature of the crime, I'd—'

Dtui threw the scalpel to the floor.

'How can you be so calm?' she shouted at the top of her voice.

Geung jumped with shock. Dtui rushed to Siri and pushed at his chest. 'Feel something, why don't you? Stop looking at her as . . .' A sob caught in her throat. 'As if she's meat.'

Tears overwhelmed her. Siri put his hand out to her but Geung stepped in between them and reached for his friend. She slapped at him but he fought his way inside her flailing arms, put his strong arms around her, and hugged her to him until she no longer had the will to fight. Together they rode out her sobs.