



The Bangkok Asset: A novel (Sonchai Jitpleecheep)

By John Burdett

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Sonchai Jitpleecheep—the brash and beguiling Royal Thai Police Force detective who has been our guide through John Burdett's five previous acclaimed Bangkok novels—is back. The former monk and devout Buddhist, forever battling to protect his karma from the assaults of morally compromising cases, is now faced with the most horrifying technological innovation to make its way to the streets of Bangkok, and a conspiracy of almost unfathomable reach.

With Sonchai on this case is the young female inspector Krom. Like Sonchai, she's an outsider on the police force, but unlike him, she is socially savvy and a technological prodigy. When they're called to a demonstration—in the midst of a typhoon—of the deadly, superhuman strength of an American man who is seemingly controlled by a CIA operative, they have no idea what they're actually witnessing or why. Their reliably obtuse and unequivocally crooked boss, Colonel Vikorn, explains some of it, but the most telling questions remain unanswered: Could the Americans have figured out a way to create a physically and psychologically enhanced supersoldier? Are they testing him—or it—on Thai soil? And why is everyone, from the Bangkok police to the international community, so eager to turn a blind eye?

Searching for the answers to these questions, Sonchai and Krom find themselves in a remote Cambodian jungle compound for aging American ex-soldiers, where they will discover just how far a government will go to protect its worst secrets—both past and present. But the case will also have much more personal repercussions for Sonchai, shaking his world to its very foundation and perhaps finally forcing him to confront his long-lost American father.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Delightfully eccentric and unpredictable . . . Sonchai is a terrific character: a devout but skeptical Buddhist with a philosophy that combines classical religion, Thai superstitions and amused pragmatism . . . Sonchai is a wise, cheeky guide through Bangkok’s baffling but fascinating mix of cultures—high and low, sexy and straight-laced, modern and traditional.”

—Adam Woog, *The Seattle Times*

“Compelling . . . The ever-appealing Sonchai, whose many-sided personality holds kaleidoscopic fascination, [will] keep series fans in thrall.”

—Bill Ott, *Booklist*

“Wild and entertaining . . . Impressively, everything comes together for a dramatic and satisfying ending.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

About the Author

JOHN BURDETT was brought up in North London and worked as a lawyer in Hong Kong. He is the author of seven previous novels, including the Bangkok series: *Bangkok 8*, *Bangkok Tattoo*, *Bangkok Haunts*, *The Godfather of Kathmandu*, and *Vulture Peak*.

www.john-burdett.com

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1

These are strange times on Planet Thailand. Even Colonel Vikorn is acting out of character. He called me at around four-thirty this morning to tell me to find my own transport to take me to a specific point on the east bank of the Chao Phraya River.

“The team is already there. Sergeant Ruamsantiah will explain.”

“Is it related to—”

“Not clear.”

He closed his phone before I could ask what it was about, and why he would need me to meet the Sergeant at such an hour at a location some ten miles from District 8. And what team, exactly, was he talking about? And why would he choose the filthiest morning I’ve witnessed since the last typhoon season twelve months ago? And most troubling of all: why was I being distracted from the case known as the Market Murder, in which the victim has been provisionally named as Nong X? A case, after all, with my name on it.

Like a dutiful serf I grabbed a pair of jeans, T-shirt, and waterproof jacket, kissed Chanya on the lips while she snored, took a peep out of the door at the sheets of rain that were flooding the street, which would be a river of brown mud in an hour or so—and called a cab. I had to promise to pay triple before the driver would consent to take me to the river. He showed up in ten minutes, his wheels sloshing through the mounting

torrent, and he turned out to be more valiant than I expected. We were within half a mile of the location given by Vikorn when he stopped. The flooding by that time was up to the level of his exhaust pipe, forcing him to keep gunning the motor while slipping the clutch, to stop water from entering the cylinders. I gave him his full fee and wished him luck on the way home and watched him drive back through the muddy floods, his engine screaming. According to the GPS on my smart phone, all I had to do was find the river and walk a few hundred yards north along its bank.

I found the river by following its thunder. I don't think I've ever heard it so loud or been so drenched. I was shocked, too, by the way the wind roared through in gusts, temporarily tearing up the mist and revealing a churning brown monster in a rage bathed in clear end-of-the-world light. I wondered how the cargo ships were faring at the port. And where had they stored all the long-tail passenger ferries, the tourist vessels, the floating restaurants, the rice barges. No boat was built for this leviathan.

From the east bank of the Chao Phraya it was easy enough to follow the GPS on my smart phone in a northward direction. Visibility was so low that even if I reached the coordinates the Colonel had given, there was no guarantee I would be able to see the people I was supposed to meet. Unless the wind conveniently cleared the air again.

For a moment it did. A sudden gust screamed down the river valley, tearing up the mist in one long howl. I was at a bend where the river made an abrupt turn to the west. I knew that bend; so did everyone who had spent Sundays hanging out on the Chao Phraya. It was a tourist spot that jutted way out into the water where you took selfies of you and your loved ones smiling and playing at happy families. Not today, though, not in this storm. According to my phone I was no more than fifty yards from the meeting point Vikorn had given, which was about twenty yards from the riverbank. I forgot about that when I caught sight of a small flat-bottomed tourist vessel downstream in the middle of the torrent, held fast by a stout rope fastened to a stanchion on the extended promontory. I stopped, gripped the safety rail, and stared.

At first I thought the only human on the boat was a tall farang with startling blond hair. He stood in some kind of high-tech parka with feet apart, arms folded, compensating for the rolling of the deck without visible effort. Then I realized he was standing over a group of terrified Thais, two men and two women. The Westerner opened his mouth to speak in what seemed like slow, deliberate instructions. Then he clapped his hands and the two Thai men fell upon the two women. It took less than a minute to throw them into the raging current, where they disappeared instantly. I stared openmouthed at the farang on the boat, the wild river, the point where the women had been instantly engulfed. Frantic for some kind of explanation, some clue that would orientate me in a moment of confusion, I turned away to search for the people I was supposed to meet. A white van was parked a few hundred yards back from the river and I made toward it.

In the couple of minutes it took to run in that direction, the wind died and the mist returned. I had to use the GPS to locate the van when it was no more than thirty feet away. I beat on the sliding door, which opened to reveal Sergeant Ruamsantiah, Colonel Vikorn's most trusted aide, who pulled me inside. I told him in a gush what I had witnessed. He wrinkled his brow and turned his head in wonder at my report. He had not seen anything himself. He had arrived nearly an hour ago and become inured to zero visibility. Fleeting breaks in the fog had ceased to seduce him out of his torpor. He told me that Vikorn had ordered him up here some time before he had called me. The weather was so bad no willing driver could be found, so Ruamsantiah drove the police van himself. He had no better idea what it was all about than did I. All he knew was that he was supposed to meet what he called "a third party," at the same coordinates that the Colonel had given to me. Now we watched through the windshield while a figure emerged out of the mist no more than ten feet from the van and made its way toward us, crouched, soaked and monochrome in black coveralls with a hood tied under the chin.

“That’s her,” Ruamsantiah said, and pulled the door open.

She was average height for a Thai woman, about five three, in her late twenties or early thirties. As far as I could tell she was pretty in a sharp-featured kind of way, but her personality hit you before you had a chance to concentrate on her sex appeal. Even without the cute black-rimmed spectacles, like miniature windows smeared with rain, you would have guessed she was a smart cookie from the new generation of Thais. She did not want to climb into the van. Instead, she jerked her chin toward the river and led us toward it. Her own van was about a hundred yards away, invisible in the dense mist. When he saw us her driver opened the sliding door. The Sergeant and I held back for her to enter first, but she shook her head to make us precede her. We obeyed.

Inside a van rocked by gusts we introduced ourselves. Her name was Krom, Inspector Krom. When she pulled back the hood I saw how close-cropped was her spiky black hair. I told her what I had just seen on the river, half hoping she would have some happy explanation, although I couldn’t think of one myself.

“I know,” she snapped. She jerked her head at the front bench of the vehicle where her driver was sitting and called my attention to the outsize gadget clamped onto the dashboard. I’d already stored the impression that it was bigger and stranger than any GPS or satellite navigation instrument I’d seen in a police van before, but technology rules by outpacing us a little more each day. Now that I examined it more carefully I saw it had some unusual black buttons with Chinese characters stamped on them in white.

Inspector Krom ordered the driver to join us in the back. He got out and reemerged at the rear door, soaked from the ten-second exposure to the storm. Then the Inspector beckoned the Sergeant and me to move forward to the front bench with her, while she sat dripping in the driver’s seat. Now she was manipulating the buttons.

“We have it on the hard disk,” she said. “About five minutes ago, right? When the mist cleared. This machine automatically switches between radar and video. The video is in color, quadruple HD, with about a thousand dots per inch, that’s nearly double the pixel density of the most advanced screens and cameras commercially available. They’re keeping the technology secret for the moment.”

“Radar, too? I didn’t know satellites used it.”

She jerked her chin at the gadget. “Synthetic aperture radar: SAR. It can penetrate cloud, even the earth up to about six inches. The Chinese were allowed to steal it from the U.S.”

She cast me a glance, aware, I suppose, of how odd the phrase allowed to steal sounded. Also, how was I to react to the information that we were using the “borrowed” Chinese version of the gadget?

“Intelligence is complicated. Actually, it’s a mess. The most overgoverned democracy in the world privatizes government so they can pretend they’re not overgoverned. The most crowded nation juggles about fifty local governments with the population of large countries. Of course it’s all out of control.” I thought I detected genuine irritation when she added, “And everything they say, everything they do, is said and done in a spirit of absolute denial of the truth. We’re screwed. There!”

She had mastered the controls and now we were looking at a replay of what I had just witnessed on the river. Perhaps the clever machine had a way of enhancing its own video, or perhaps the weird clarity of that fleeting moment had made the scene unusually photogenic; either way, the definition, detail, and color were amazing as I watched a replay of the double murder by drowning.

“You know who these people are?” I asked.

“Yes. The two Thai men are low-grade thugs.” She paused the video and turned to stare at me. “You just saw the older one throw his wife overboard, mother of his three kids. The younger one drowned his own mother.”

“WHAT?” I glared at her, refusing to believe what I had heard.

Sergeant Ruamsantiah stiffened on the bench next to me. We exchanged a glance. I shivered. “Could you say that again?” the Sergeant asked.

“No. You heard it right.”

“Play it one more time,” he said. He didn’t care that she was superior in rank to him; that was an order. She replayed the video: there was no doubt about it, a Thai man about thirty years old threw a woman his own age into the raging torrent. At the same time a young man in his twenties drowned a middle-aged woman. The Sergeant was still not satisfied and neither was I. We didn’t say so, but he wanted proof that what the Inspector had said was true. In Thailand matricide is virtually unknown. It is one of those crimes so extreme, inviting a sentence of millions of years in a hell starker than stone, before the perpetrator reemerges in some primitive life form, that most of us, including me, believe it to be exclusively Western. Inspector Krom, though, seemed to take the unnatural crime in her stride.

“That’s as much as you saw, right?” she asked me.

“Yes. After that the wind died and the fog returned.”

“So, here’s the continuation in real time. It will have to be radar, which is monochrome, because of the mist. Look.”

I studied the screen, now black and white, as the tall farang threw off his padded parka to reveal a magnificent torso under a black T-shirt, removed his pants leaving boxer shorts, took a couple of paces to the stern, poised like a professional swimmer, and dived elegantly into the churning water. The two Thai men stared after him but made no effort to move.

“Who in hell is that?” I muttered.

“I don’t know his real name, if he has one.” The Inspector waited to see if I would react to that. I didn’t. “They call him the Asset. Or, if you prefer, Goldman’s Asset—that could be changing, though.”

“What could be changing?”

“Goldman’s ownership of his Asset.”

“Who is Goldman?”

Krom played with the buttons some more to change focus. Now we were looking at a great shadowy hulk standing on the riverbank no more than a hundred yards from where the van was parked. Even in monochrome with nobody around to compare him with he appeared gigantic, in a weatherproof jacket the size of a bedsheet, hands in his pockets, thinning hair blown about by the wind.

“Meet Joseph George Goldman,” Krom said. “Former CIA officer, retired.” She cast us a glance. “He still works for them, though. On contract.” I looked at her, waiting for more. “He’s too old, really, but they can’t do without him.”

“Why?”

“Wait and see.”

“This is the weirdest day,” I muttered. “Really, the weirdest day of my entire career.”

“How so?”

“I’m investigating a murder by beheading that happened last week in the market behind the police station. Suddenly I’m told to come here in this filthy storm. When I asked if it was related, the Colonel said he wasn’t sure. Now two women are murdered—drowned—with no clear motive and no reason for supposing there’s a link with the case I’m working on.”

“Get used to it,” she said.

“Why?”

She shrugged, as if to say that if I didn’t understand yet, I soon would.

Now she manipulated the radar to return to the river. She used the boat as a point of reference—the two men were huddled in the stern, pressing their bodies together to make one dark heap—then tracked across the river until she located a blob in the water. It was the tall blond farang who I’d decided was as good as dead. No one survives that kind of current, that kind of flood. Buddha knew how many tons of violent water would be brought to bear on a frail human form, no matter how much iron those muscles had pumped.

But he wasn’t dead or even in trouble. He disappeared from the screen perhaps a dozen times, when it was unclear if he had drowned or if the mist had simply engulfed him; then, with a regularity that became increasingly improbable, the cropped bullet head would reappear a couple of yards nearer the bank. Sure, the flood was taking him downstream, but the fact that he was able to fight the current and remain almost at the same point on the river spoke of an unbelievable strength and endurance. When the Inspector switched back to Goldman, that giant, we watched him walk parallel to the bank to reach a point downstream from the swimmer. At the same time he removed his jacket and let the wind take it. Now Joseph George Goldman stood in a huge dark T-shirt and a knotted rope wrapped just under his gut. This he unwound as he walked. When the swimmer was near enough to the bank for the American to predict where he would make contact with the wall, Goldman secured one end of the line to a steel upright and let the other down the side of the bank. The swimmer reached the wall about twenty yards upstream and allowed the current to bounce him against it until he reached the rope, which he immediately wound around himself. He paused for a couple of minutes before hauling himself up.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Eric Campanelli:

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