

“Aside from the pleasure of unraveling the mystery and deciphering the coded messages, the work’s other great strength lies in its vivid portrayal of Thai society during a time of major transition. It masterfully intertwines the past with the present, bringing us back to contemplate our own lives and society today.

It is a remarkable feat of storytelling.”

— **Pongwut Rujirachakorn**

“Exceptionally sharp and brilliant. There were several paragraphs that sent chills down my spine again and again as I read them. What I especially love is the meticulous attention to capturing emotions and the atmosphere of the era. Beyond that, the character names in the story are chosen with such refined taste and intensity.

I absolutely love it.”

— **Prapt**

“Panu’s book is one that I found immensely enjoyable. The author is incredibly talented—wow, the writing is excellent. Beyond that, I feel far more attached to the characters than I usually do with characters from typical entertaining detective novels. And it is this very emotional connection that makes me deeply delighted with this book.”

— **Wiwat Lertwiwatwongsa**

“A novel that is enjoyable and captivating to read, one that draws you in so deeply that you feel as though you have stepped into that era yourself. It offers both historical knowledge and thoughtful reflections on the past.”

— **Aekkaburut Niratthisai**

“More than simply being a historical mystery novel, in which the elements of the puzzle and the atmosphere of the era dance together in perfect rhythm, *The Case of the Red Rapier* gives birth to vivid characters and believable motivations flowing through the river of history.”

— **Maytawee Holasut**

“This is one of those books that is nearly impossible to put down.”

— **Patrawan Dear**

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The Case of the Red Rapier

คดีอาชญากรรม

Panu Trivej

Translated by
Maythawee Kanoksilp

การอ่านคือรากฐานที่สำคัญ



Publisher's Foreword

If Piang-or had merely stated that a detective's goal is to investigate the past, this editor would like to propose a comparison: perhaps readers are a kind of detective themselves. After all, when we think about it, readers also seek to uncover the past in much the same way detectives do, don't they?

We turn the pages of a book in search of the answers to who, what, where, when, how, why, for what reason, and for what purpose. Readers are detectives who investigate stories and meanings through language.

One could say that uncovering what once happened within the labyrinth of letters is the instinctive duty of every reader. Therefore, if we view this book as a case waiting to be investigated—to uncover the past and decode its secrets—how many red herrings might be hidden within this case, waiting to lure us away?

The Case of the Red Rapier is brimming with red herrings. The author has created at least two schools of red herrings. The first exists at the level of the story. Here, we encounter red herrings in the form of syringe fragments at the crime scene, a missing yellow sapphire necklace, and the Communist group's coded communications. This first school of red rapier fish becomes an obstacle for the characters as

they attempt to uncover the truth behind the murder case at the Occidental Hotel.

The second school exists at the level of narration. These red herrings are scattered everywhere, from discussions of artistic knowledge and references to historical facts, to observations on politics. These fish lead us away from the expectation of reading a traditional *whodunit* mystery and instead invite us to contemplate unexpected philosophical questions.

Furthermore, these second-level red herring reinforce the value of being a reader. While detectives must pursue a single, definitive truth, readers are not limited to searching for only one answer. We read in order to experience the countless meanings contained within a text.

Therefore, while Piang-or, K.K., and Inspector Phuchong find themselves overwhelmed by the red herrings, we readers are free to savor them without restraint. Readers are like gourmands, hungering endlessly for meaning, and *The Case of the Red Rapier* is a work that fills our appetite completely—leaving us satisfied in a way we will never forget.

Author's Foreword

The Case of the Red Rapier is a novel written in 2007, depicting events that take place around 1957. It is now being republished in 2025. Thai society has changed rapidly. Bangkok in 2007 was not the same city it had been fifty years earlier. Even Bangkok today is no longer the same as it was when the novel was first published.

I had not revisited Piang-or, Karnak, and the rest of the characters for a very long time. When the novel was selected for republication, it became necessary to pay them a visit once more. I must admit that when I picked up the manuscript again, I felt a considerable weight on my heart.

Piang-or is not an ordinary detective. She is a thoughtful and inquisitive person, curious not only about the facts surrounding a murder case but also about the social changes taking place during the 1950s (the period in which the story is set) and in 2007 (when the novel was first written). I was very concerned that her observations and reflections might have become outdated.

Fortunately, after finishing the manuscript, I was able to breathe a sigh of relief and murmur to myself, "It hasn't grown old after all." Thai society may have moved forward in some respects, but the same questions still remain relevant. Whether ten-odd years ago or nearly seventy years ago,

Piang-or's voice may be filled with innocence, yet it is the very same voice the author uses to question the world around him today. It is a voice of innocence, but one grounded in reason and guided by goodwill toward others to the greatest extent possible.

I hope that in 2025, a new generation of readers will enjoy accompanying Piang-or on her journey as much as I have.

Panu Trivej

Blue Tornado

*(Adapted from the memoirs of His Serene Highness
Prince Chula Chakrabongse; first published in 1936)*

The Nürburgring racing circuit in the Eifel Mountains was built in 1927. It was the largest racing circuit in the world. One lap is as long as 17 miles and is filled with bends and turns of every kind. One moment the road plunges down a steep hill; after the next turn, it climbs back up a mountain. How exceedingly difficult it is. A single lap contains as many as 167 turns.

At the exit stands an enormous grandstand for spectators, so large that there is a complete restaurant beneath it. Every racing car has its own garage. The scenery around the circuit is also exceedingly beautiful, for lofty mountains and rows of stately pine trees stand all around it, pleasing to the eye. Racing drivers throughout Europe speak with one voice that there is no racing circuit anywhere in the world as beautiful and as worthy of admiration as this one. Whenever there is no practice or racing taking place, the public is allowed to bring ordinary automobiles onto the track and drive around it for pleasure.

At that time, Bira held first place in the standings of the British Racing Drivers' Association. He had accumulated 10 points from victories at Monaco

and Brooklands, leaving a gap over the driver in second place, Seaman, who had only 4 points. Yet Nürburgring was renowned for being more brutal than any circuit on which he had ever competed.

Bira received an ERA racing car as a gift for his twenty-first birthday on July 15, which in Europe is considered the most important birthday of all, because it is the age at which one reaches legal adulthood. The ERA was a lightweight racing car with a 1,500-cc engine. A single car cost as much as 100,000 baht.

In those days, motor racing had to be conducted outside England because the government still would not permit races to be held on public roads. They would not allow the roads to be closed for competition. England was the only country in Europe that imposed such a prohibition. The British Racing Drivers' Association therefore held competitions in other countries whose governments did not possess the old-fashioned notion of hating motor racing as the British government did.

Bira entered his first race in an international lightweight-car competition at Dieppe, France. Bira, still unfamiliar with a machine of such speed, nevertheless drove exceedingly well from the very beginning. Although he lost time changing spark plugs on the fourth lap, he still managed to fight his way back into third place. He pursued a Frenchman named Veyron and stayed close behind him for several laps.

At last Bira caught Veyron and won second place. How excited and pleased we were, you can probably guess. A foreign newspaper, *L'Actualité Automobile*, wrote: "The young Thai named Bira has shown us that he is a very fine driver." And on the British side, *The Motor* wrote: "Bira drives remarkably well."

When we decided to participate in the racing season officially, it became necessary for us to acquire another car as a reserve. On March 4, Bira went to inspect the new car in the garage. The new car was exactly the same as the old one. It felt as though they were twin children. Bira therefore decided to give the two cars names, using the most famous pair of twins of all—the twins who founded Rome. He named the old car Romulus and the new car Remus. Afterward, he instructed the mechanics to paint Remus the same blue color as Romulus.

Speaking of this blue, which became his personal color, it came about in a curious way. Bira wanted a blue car, but he had not yet decided whether he wanted a dark blue or a light blue. By chance he met a female friend, Barbara, the daughter of Mr. Grut of the Siam Electricity Company. She was dressed in a beautiful light-blue outfit; Bira asked to cut a small piece from that silk garment and used it as the color sample for his racing car. It was this color that Bira later used to bring fame to Siam throughout Europe.

When driving around the track, he wore a light-blue shirt and cap. Seen from a distance, everything appeared blue, because the car itself was the same color. Only his red scarf with little white dots upon it was of a different color.

It was this very blue that later came to be known as Bira Blue, or "Blue Tornado."

The debut of Remus was not as successful as it ought to have been. Remus behaved badly. While traveling at a speed of about 100 miles per hour, it kicked up a piece of gravel that had been spread on the road to prevent skidding. The stone flew up and struck one lens of Bira's goggles. Although the lens was made of a type of glass that should not have shattered, when struck by gravel while the car was traveling at 100 miles per hour, the force was as great as if it had been shot from a gun. The outer surface of the lens cracked, the inner surface shattered slightly, and a tiny fragment of glass entered his eye. Although his eye was temporarily blinded, Bira did not lose his temper. He was able to reduce the car's speed and bring it to a halt by applying the brakes.

Despite this misfortune, in less than a week's time Bira took the old car, Romulus, to compete at Monaco. Remus was left in the garage for repairs. The mechanics discovered that the carburetor (the device that fed fuel into the engine) had malfunctioned,

causing the fuel-control switch to stick and cease functioning. We concluded that Remus ought to be laid up for a while. Instead, we took the large supercharger, capable of increasing speed to 120 miles per hour, and fitted it to Romulus for use at Monte Carlo. The cost of repairing, modifying, and maintaining the two cars consumed many tens of thousands of baht.

Motor racing, as I have described, required enormous sums of money. This was true not only for our team, but also for drivers of other nationalities. These circumstances were enough that the sport ought to have collapsed altogether. By chance, however, two important statesmen—Mussolini of Italy and Hitler of Germany—saw motor racing as a highly beneficial sport. Not only did it demonstrate to the world that Italians and Germans possessed skill and courage, it also showed that they were masters in the construction of motorcars. In this way, it also served as an advertisement for the sale of automobiles.

Both statesmen agreed to use government funds to support automobile manufacturers in the construction of racing cars. In Germany, the companies that received subsidies to build Grand Prix cars were Mercedes-Benz and Auto Union. In Italy there was Alfa Romeo. The situation was the opposite in France and England, whose governments gave no encouragement at all. Even when private company owners in those two countries—

such as Mr. Bugatti—were willing to invest their own money, and had once enjoyed considerable success, they could no longer compete with the German and Italian companies that received government support.

Before the race at Nürburgring, Bira drove around the entire circuit to familiarize himself with it and reported that it was extraordinarily difficult. There was nothing but climbing and descending all the time. It felt as though one were riding a roller coaster at a winter fair, to the point of becoming dizzy. Because Bira wished to become thoroughly acquainted with the circuit, even after dinner, and even after darkness had fallen, he would still take a Bentley and drive around the track repeatedly so as to become even more familiar with it.

This race gathered together many of the most famous drivers in Europe. Among them was Trossi, an Italian driver of great expertise and experience, driving a Maserati. There was also Tenni, who had once been a champion motorcycle racer, and Seaman, Bira's fellow British racing driver, who drove an ERA just as Bira did. During practice on Thursday the 11th, Trossi posted an exceptionally fast time. His best lap was 11 minutes and 34 seconds, making everyone else seem slow by comparison. Trossi was an extremely skilled driver. He had spent many years driving large racing cars for Alfa Romeo and had become quite wealthy as a result.

In this race there was no one who knew the circuit as well as Trossi. His car was also particularly suited to a winding track because it had independent suspension on all four wheels. Even so, Bira still performed well enough to place third in practice, with a time of exactly 12 minutes.

On the morning of the 14th, rain began to fall before the start. This caused us great concern, because Bira had never before raced in the rain anywhere. By sheer chance, he now had to encounter rain on the most difficult racing circuit of all. Who would not be anxious? Just before the start, the rain lessened, though it continued to drizzle. The race distance was eight laps of the circuit, a total of 112 miles. Although the distance was not especially long, it was extraordinarily difficult. Across those eight laps there were no fewer than 1,336 turns.

The start of the race was signaled not only by a flag, but also by a flare. Every car got away quickly, and in a moment they disappeared from sight. Bira passed Austin and moved up into third place. Seaman and Trossi fought fiercely for first place. Meanwhile, the cars rounded the mountainside and vanished from our view. When the cars came back past the pits, instead of Seaman leading as we had expected, it was Trossi. Bira was in second place, though some distance behind Trossi, and Tenni was rapidly closing in behind him.

Only after everyone else had passed did Seaman finally arrive. We learned that he had been leading comfortably, but as Trossi drew nearer and nearer, whether he lost his temper or simply became careless, no one could say, when he reached a slippery section of road, he failed to negotiate the turn. His car slid off the road, and it took him a full seven minutes before he was able to get moving again.

On the second lap, Bira was still in second place, but Tenni came extremely close behind him and before long succeeded in passing him. This was because Tenni was far more familiar with the circuit. After five laps, Trossi and Tenni were still comfortably in the lead. Bira had no hope of catching them, and it was quite right that he did not even attempt to do so. He did not become carried away trying to chase those two men and end up off the road like Seaman. It was better to remain on the road and continue driving until the finish line. Bira continued driving at an easy pace, and by the fifth lap it seemed certain that he would finish in third place.

At last the race came to an end. Trossi finished first, Tenni second, and Bira third. Yet he had driven well, and I should like to make our fellow Thais understand that to finish third on a circuit so difficult that racing drivers throughout Europe feared it; to have to drive in rain and on slippery roads; and to have to compete against first-rate drivers—this

was a very great honor indeed. The German spectators applauded and cheered Bira with tremendous enthusiasm. During the prize-giving ceremony, Bira brought out a large Thai tricolor flag and waved it proudly. The old Siamese flag, the Elephant Flag, was known throughout Europe. But the tricolor flag was new. Almost no one abroad recognized it. For that reason, we decided that whenever we had the opportunity, we ought to make an effort to introduce foreigners to this new flag.

We left Nürburgring on June 15 and arrived in the town of Péronne in northern France on Friday evening. Péronne was a small town, and like small towns in general, it possessed a large square in its center. On certain days the square served as a marketplace. Around it stood the town hall and several small restaurants. The lodging and food available in the town's restaurants were, however, rather poor. During the Great War, the town of Péronne had been completely damaged by artillery fire. Consequently, every building in the town had been rebuilt after the war. Bira took the opportunity to place a bouquet of flowers before a monument erected in memory of racing drivers who had lost their lives. He prayed that the sacred powers might grant him good fortune in competition.

Bira continued to race at many circuits throughout Europe. He won race after race and eventually had his name entered into the Hall of Fame of

the British Racing Drivers' Association. In 1939, Bira returned to Thailand together with Romulus. He began preparations for the Bangkok Grand Prix, inviting many famous drivers to compete on a course laid out around Sanam Luang and the Grand Palace. The event, however, had to be canceled because the Second World War broke out first.

Chapter 1

1

For me, the three most beautiful things in the world are: a man who played violin, three sisters, and a ballroom dance party.

To this day, whenever I hear music from a turntable (grandkids call it Grandpa's CD player), I close my eyes and see the dance floor, pretty girls in flared dresses, bracelets sparkling on their wrists, swinging their arms—jewelry clinking—men in dapper, flashing suits, with cool oil-slicked hair, music playing live: *chhing...chap...chap... chhing...chap...chap...triple meter*, called the Viennese Waltz, men and women spin counterclockwise, swinging back and forth like the moon orbiting the sun. *cha...dad... cha...dad ... cha...cha...cha...dad....* Quickstep, a rhythm where people leap around the floor like a flock of spot-billed pelicans hopping and playing fish-catching in a pond. When the drum thumps, followed by the bass—*thud...thud... thud...thud...*—it is time for tango, a fiery rhythm where boys and girls melt into each other's arms.

I wonder how I would feel about the beautiful ballroom dancing if this old lady could dance. Would it become more exquisite, or uglier? Luckily, it seems I will never find out. With such an old age, fragile bones, the doctor says that if I ever fall or someone steps on my foot, I may need to be in a cast for the rest of my life. And who would be able to learn to dance without falling or getting one's foot stepped on?

But perhaps it is this unfulfilled desire that makes the parties so vividly beautiful in my memory.

Yes, indeed. Incomparably beautiful. Even the night the young woman stood alone amid the dance floor...no, especially that night. She swayed like a bamboo against the wind, eyes closed, deep into the dreams, before collapsing onto the floor...

2

Another reason I loved ballroom dancing, loved those times, must have been because of the young man with blue eyes, light blond hair, a tall, thin-frame, and a high nose bridge, the type of Farang who made people exclaim: “Faraang, Farang”. K.K. was a violinist of the Propaganda Ministry as well as an at-home music teacher. Back in those days, when people talked about music at home, no one thought of CDs or tapes, but rather a music book on a stand. Family members would play live music in front of their family. If you wanted to listen to music, someone would have to play it for you. Hence, the richer in music teachers Phra Nakhon was than it is now.

K.K. played string instruments as sharply as a cut of a knife, yet the same notes carried warmth. Sometimes I wondered whether he played to hurt or to soothe his listeners. The music brought smile onto the audience’s faces as their eyes were full of tears. It was heavenly, yet felt like a fire was burning their chests. When K.K. perched the violin under

his chin, I swear that log of wood, those strings, and the thin bow sang, as if they could really articulate Thai language.

While the instrument spoke many a languages, its master was hopelessly clueless about Thai vocabulary and grammar. It had been nearly six months; even with phrases like “How are you?,” “Have you eaten yet?,” Mr. Farang still sometimes mispronounced and said them in a wrong order like “Are you how?,” “Have you eaten yeast?” So I had to step in as both an interpreter and a guide...a guide, that is right. Who would have thought that the young man whose fingers dance across those four strings, the owner of the turquoise eyes, could not see?

When I close my eyes, the townhouse by the Khlong Bang Lam Phu is still clear in my mind, with their windows facing the water. Back then, the Lam Phu trees grew here and there; on some nights, the light of the fireflies glimmered. During high-tide season, the boatyards were busy with hammering, planing, and wood-scraping sounds all day and night, to the point where we had to sleep with our windows closed. Besides the sound of boat assembly, there were prayers from Chakraphong Mosque during the day. The vegetable and fish markets were chaotic from early morning. At times, I feared that Phra Nakhon might be too noisy and tumultuous for a blind musician, but if K.K. ever thought so, he never let me know.

The street in front of the apartment was lined with

sok trees on both sides of the tram tracks. In the morning, staffs would use sticks to remove dust and debris to prevent the trams from tilting and falling off the tracks. The children, mischievous as ever, liked to place soda or beer caps on the tracks for the trams to crush flat, then use them as flicking toys.

When I was a kid, I read detective novels by Luang Saranupraphan and dreamed of having a house on Khao San Road. So when looking for a place for K.K., I chose a neighborhood crowded with Europeans; the violinist wouldn't feel out of place. Not only that, living in that area would not feel lonely. Because the area from Khao San Road to Khlong Tom was packed with shops, from Wilawan Florist, Tai Jong coffee shop, Nha Wua Herbs to Thai Pairach Mannequin.

I liked to wander around Sanam Luang. The blonde man would stop to play with stray dogs that came to sniff and scratch him. I had to warn him that stray dogs in Phra Nakhon had not been vaccinated and were not as safe as those in London. Yet, the canines never hurt the blind man.

Sometimes we would visit book stalls. Even with chests of the braille books he had brought from home, K.K. liked to listen to people reading poetry. He loved Sunthorn Phu's Nirat. It must have been normal for someone who had strayed far from home. The gentleman was impressed by the beautiful meter. Out of nowhere, he would pick up and play his violin along my poetry reading. Although I did not know how to do riffs and runs, reading poetry along a Farang's

fiddle sounded quite beautiful. During the yearning for the loved one, the fingertips danced across the string instrument, easing the ears. While cheerfully enjoying the birds and the forest, K.K. dropped the bow and flicked the strings merrily with his fingers.

Compared to others in those days, I was considered quite progressive. A man and a woman, not spouse, went everywhere together. And on top of that, the man was a foreigner. Fortunately, the elders chose to turn a blind eye. It might have been partly because I openly declared myself a “working woman,” educated abroad, fully credentialed, able to earn my own living, with no need to bow to old-fashioned conventions. But I could not deceive myself into believing that was the real reason. More likely, people simply feared my father’s influence.

The teasing mostly came from market vendors. Merely having a pale-eyed Farang lingering around the market was already enough to attract attention. Worse still, that Farang always had a Thai woman by his side. People called me “Madam Farang” or “the Farang’s wife” behind my back. Usually it sounded harmless, but sometimes the teasing became rather cutting. Once, a fish seller shouted after me in the market, “The mackerel is quite fresh today, my dear! Would you want some?” Another lady chimed in, “It has to be dolphin for this girl. A smelly fish like mackerel is not for her.”

I could only hurry away. I wanted to respond, but barely swallowing my own saliva was already hard to do.

3

Ballroom dancing, a violin man, and three sisters.

Perhaps because I was an only child, I always longed for siblings when I was young. Whenever I saw a group of girls dressed beautifully, stepping out of Melai's shop with new handbags, skirts, and cosmetics they had just purchased, my heart would flutter even though I was a woman myself. Especially when their faces were similar—like classical music repeating the same melody over and over, changing only a few notes or rhythms. Like butterfly pea blossoms blooming side by side. Three flowers together—that was beauty. Three flowers together—that was perfection.

No women were as immaculately beautiful as the ballroom dancers. I could not explain to younger generations just how pretty they were. They were nothing like those ladies lined up on Bangkok sidewalks these days. Back then, Lilaat Road was like the Himmapan forest itself. The dancers resembled kinnaree maidens, dressed in shimmering finery, adorned like a starry night. No... more like warriors preparing their weapons for battle. Their beauty lay in their pride, in their confidence in the art they had inherited. A woman who loved ballroom dancing was a woman who loved being a woman, cherishing feminine allure and illusion.

Among all the dancers, none could come close to the three sisters from the Plengnakorn family. Whenever they appeared at an event, they were like a bouquet of flowers. It

was almost impossible for men to look elsewhere. Especially when they glided gracefully, hands unfurling in elegant invitation, drawing every gaze toward them, hips swaying sharply like musicians shaking an angklung. Their chests poised, small shoulders straight, long necks held high. The most radiant of the three sisters was undoubtedly Wasitthi, the oldest. She was the centerpiece flower. Waricha, the youngest, was a budding flower, lovely in her youth; once fully in bloom, she would surely attract no fewer bees than her elder sister did. The middle sister, Watinee, possessed a simple beauty, like green leaves completing the bouquet, balancing the eldest sister's brilliance and the youngest's delicate charm.

A lot of wealthy young men competed to buy time for ballroom dance lessons with them. Beyond paying tuition fees, if one of the girls coyly asked for jewelry or a new dress, what man would dare refuse? Wasitthi's latest guy was a rich young owner of a record company, while Watinee had recently been appearing at events with a commissioned officer. Society speculated on how many dances these pairs would go on for. Beautiful women were like cold-climate trees, shedding and renewing their leaves every season. Despite their being occasionally scoffed at or gossiped about, it hardly caused concern. An English writer once said: *There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.*

4

On the evening of Tuesday, April 22, hot winds carried dry air across the capital. K.K. had to play violin for *the* Kotsanakarn Band, and having no business to attend to, I tagged along to the party. The Occidental Hotel was a famous riverside hotel on the Chao Phraya. Originally, it had merely been a small wooden lodging house for sailors stopping over to rest. Later on, the owner hired an Italian architect for additional designs on the building, until it now became a first-class hotel on Charoen Krung Road. The front entrance rose in a six-arched curve, with sand gardens and round tables laid out with English-language newspapers. The reception staff dressed elegantly in wide-legged Western trousers, high-collared raj-pattern jackets, and canvas boots, standing by to serve guests.

The Flower Swing ballroom, where the dance party was held, was a rectangular building enclosing a garden dense with tropical plants. The flowers' fragrance drifted richly even into the hall itself. That night's event was held in the Kannika Hall, about half the size of a football field. The floor was vine-patterned, velvet drapes hung along the walls, and the hotel had installed a polished wooden dance floor. The floor was raised on one side for the orchestra, while the other was lined with glass panels overlooking the Chao Phraya River. Guests exhausted from dancing would rest there, sipping wine, savoring exquisite dishes, and exchanging

gossip in hushed conversation.

A little after eight o'clock, some guests turned toward the entrance. Their fixed gazes drew others to look as well. Before long, a ripple of excitement spread through the hall. Conversations quieted down, though the music continued. The drums beat out a boom...boom...rhythm as young military officer entered with Waricha on his left arm and Watinee on his right. The elder sister dazzled in a pale green evening gown, while the younger wore a black skirt falling below the knees, ivory bracelets around her wrists, and a deep blue neckline that accentuated a figure more mature than her years. Waricha was fifteen years old that year. And that dress practically announced that she was ready to enter society.

At that moment everyone shared the same thought: if the younger sister was already this beautiful, how much more extraordinary would Wasitthi be? She entered the room as though drifting down from the heavens. Her sapphire-colored silk gown glittered with gemstones; the train of her skirt billowed like ocean waves. Around her neck shone a golden sapphire necklace, radiant as though someone had cut away a piece of the sun itself and hung it there. The priceless jewel had been a gift from Chatri, the millionaire owner of a record company, who followed quietly behind her. He swept out one hand toward his companion, as if inviting every eye in the room to admire a masterpiece sculpture.

Someone muttered from a table behind, "So this is the

end of Wasitthi's youth."

"What on earth are you talking about?" her table mate asked. "Can't you see how radiant she is?"

"That is the last bloom before withering."

I was seated at the same table as Uncle Choengklong, my father's Thai-Chinese friend who had become wealthy through foreign trade. Sitting with us was his son, Wassorn, who looked four or five years younger than me. He wore a crew cut and had sharp eyes, yet paid no attention to the atmosphere around him, staring only at the knife and fork in his hands.

"Piang-or, aren't you going out to dance?"

"I don't know how."

"Neither do I. Perfect, then. So I'll have someone to talk to."

We chatted idly. I asked about export business. These days their customers had shifted from Europe to Japan. Though Japan had lost the war just as our country had, they had suffered far more severely and now had a tremendous demand for food. Uncle Choengklong had even begun practicing Japanese syllables—*a-i-u-e-o*—so he could converse with clients. I tried speaking with him, but after only a sentence or two we both had to stop because neither of us understood the other. The middle-aged man admitted he still needed much more practice.

"What's the point of learning an imperialist language?"

the young man interrupted abruptly. Uncle Choengklong was about to scold him, but the boy pressed on first. “Soon there’ll only be two languages worth knowing: Chinese and Russian.”

“*Wo hui shuo yi dian dian* (I can speak a little Chinese),” I spoke in a friendly tone.

The corner of his eye twitched. “Too bad I can’t speak it yet. The education my father supports is full of pointless nonsense. Just like this ridiculous ballroom dancing business.”

“I think ballroom dancing is the true people’s sport,” I answered. “The Ballroom Dance Association of Thailand was founded in 1932, around the same age as the new political system itself. Maybe it’s only a coincidence, but it’s a memorable one.”

Uncle Choengklong apologized quickly. “My dear, Plew, please don’t mind him. He’s been in with the wrong crowd since entering university.”

I stopped paying attention to the young man and turned instead toward the orchestra. K.K. was playing violin. He wore a perfectly tailored suit from Nopparat Tailors. His eyes were closed; his expression dreamy. The sound coming from his violin were not merely *oh...ee... ee...oh...*, but an actual song. Without realizing it, I stared at him with softened eyes, only coming back to myself when I noticed Wassorn looking directly at me. My face flushed hot.

“Is that Farang who plays violin your husband? I saw that you guys came here together.”

“No. He’s just a friend.”

Without hearing it, I already knew what he was about to say next.

“Of course. Everybody knows what Farangs think of Thai ladies...”

Uncle Choengklon trembled. “Apologize to her right now.”

“...And once they get bored, they just run back to their own country.”

The merchant banged his fist against the table. “Get out. Right now.”

The young man smirked. “I never wanted to come to a capitalist gathering like this in the first place.” He slung his jacket over his shoulder and gave us both an awkward wai. In that moment I noticed the pin attached to his inner shirt: a portrait of Chairman Mao. It looked oddly clumsy, almost laughable.

Uncle Choengklon turned to me. “I’m sorry, Piang-or.”

I smiled forgivingly, but inside, I kept turning over the words I had heard. So often, meaningless insults lodged deepest in the mind. I suddenly felt too irritated to remain seated. “Please excuse me.”

I stepped out onto the balcony for air, dabbing at my tears with a handkerchief. Ridiculous...crying again over this... I had gone through it countless times before... I should have been able to endure it by now. This was a burden I had to carry alone, something I could never discuss with anyone,

especially not K.K.

Once, during a reception at a government ministry, the wife of an important official had made pointed remarks about K.K., and they messed with my mind for days. When I returned home, that musician, whose eyes could not see, somehow sensed my feelings with uncanny accuracy. He asked what had happened. I told him what the lady had warned me about. After listening, he twisted his cheek as though words were trapped inside his mouth, unable to come out.

...If this troubles you so much... he began. I struck him hard in the chest and buried my face there. *Don't say it. Don't say it.* If there was anything that might make K.K. want to leave, then I would rather bear everything alone. Nothing in this world lasted forever, but was it wrong to wish for just another month, another week? If I had to trade one of my eyes for an extra day with the person I loved, I would tear out both.

The river breeze drifted across the balcony, snapping my scarf in the wind. Looking back into Kannika Hall, I saw the conductor lower his baton as the music faded. Young men and women bowed politely to each other. Some returned hand in hand to their tables; others exchanged small formalities. Quite a few men leaned close to whisper invitations for the next dance.

This was the moment when outsiders could easily guess the nature of a couple's relationship. Strangers or new acquaintances usually danced together only once; that alone would normally be satisfying enough. Meanwhile, couples

growing closer maintained a careful distance, lowering their heads and shuffling their feet as though deliberately crushing insects on the floor. But if they embraced at the waist or shoulders and refused to part, it meant an intimacy deeper than anything displayed openly on the dance floor.

The orchestra did not keep guests waiting long. Drums pounded in rhythm, brass instruments blared sharply, and people rose from their dining tables—some without even having time to sit down properly. Young men searched for women without partners, while the ladies sat with chins propped on their hands, pretending to be nonchalant, fluttering fans as though still weary from dancing. Yet all it took was for the man they secretly hoped for to approach, bow slightly, and extend his hand. Then the beauty would smile shyly, take his hand, and walk away with him, as though the music were a flowing river and they were fish swimming endlessly within it.

My eyes wandered from one couple to another. The interval between songs was always the most chaotic part. There were more than a hundred guests that night; each song filled the floor with at least thirty dancing couples. Men scanned the ballroom, leading women toward empty spaces, while couples who had already agreed to dance together waited at the edge of the floor.

Another gust blew in from the river. I pulled my scarf tighter around myself.

“Is that Farang who plays violin your husband? I saw

that you guys came here together.”

The moment I heard those words, my fists clenched tight and my temples throbbed. *Enough is enough.* My anger flared at once. But when I turned around, I was startled to find that the speaker was only a young girl, her lips as red as strawberries, hair curled into soft waves, and a colorful headband matching her makeup. She looked like one of the dolls displayed in Kingkaew’s storefront window.

It was Waricha, the youngest daughter of the Plengnakorn family.

“I asked if you know the Farang who’s playing violin.”

I nodded.

“He is amazing. I’ve never seen anyone play as well as your boyfriend.”

My lips parted, and it took a long moment before the word “thank you” finally emerged.

“What are you doing out here? For me, I just needed some fresh air. I’ve been dancing all night. It was suffocating in there.” As soon as she finished speaking, she drew in a huge breath. Her chest rose against her dress before slowly sinking again. “Ahh... I’m so happy I finally got to meet you, Phee Piang-or. I’ve wanted to for so long.”

“You know me?”

“The girls at school talk about you all the time. Every English student knows who you are.”

“You flatter me too much.”

“People tell stories about the murder case at the

Thai embassy. Someone even brought an English-language newspaper to show me once. Oh! Though I couldn't read it, of course. How long have you been a detective?"

"I'm not a detective," I denied quickly. At the time of the incident, the consulate had not wanted London authorities involved, so they investigated secretly among themselves. I had been an outsider who somehow ended up dragged into it anyway.

"I'm your fan, Phee Piang-or. I want to be a detective too." I thought silently to myself: *And I want to dance like you.* "But I probably couldn't become one. Detectives have to be smart, brilliant even, and that's not me at all. But I do know what I'll become." The girl leaned closer, pulling the black lace shawl tighter around herself and lowering her voice. "I'm going to become a spy. Spies don't have to be as clever as detectives. I just have to be brave and quick-witted. But do you know the most important thing of all?" She smiled mischievously. "You have to be beautiful and charming enough to bewitch a guy "

I laughed softly, to hide my shyness. I wanted to continue talking with her, but I had to excuse myself and return to the ballroom.

"Thought you'd already abandoned me." K.K. smiled as he waited at the dining table.

"I was thinking about it. How did you walk here by yourself?"

“One of the band mates helped lead me over. He probably pitied me, seeing me standing in the middle of the platform awkwardly.”

“I had to go outside for some fresh air. It’s so stuffy in there I can barely breathe.” I found myself silently grateful to Waricha. Talking to her had lightened my mood enough that I could finally relax again. “Did the band play well tonight?”

“Mr.Sang has only rehearsed with us for two weeks, but he’s already Kru Pramot’s star pupil. Mr.Suthee couldn’t make it tonight, but the replacement musician the troupe found plays trumpet wonderfully well.”

Just then Uncle Choengklong appeared. “Oh! Piang-or, dear, you’re back already?” He seemed visibly excited about something. “A telegram just arrived from Java. They finally agreed to let my cargo ship dock. I have been negotiating forever, but at last we can do business together.”

“That’s great luck.”

“It’s not just luck. If I owe thanks to anyone, it’s your father. He was the one who introduced me to important people in Java. Otherwise my ship would still be floating aimlessly in the middle of the ocean.”

I choked inwardly, as though something hard had risen from my stomach and lodged in my throat. K.K. immediately sensed it and reached under the table to squeeze my hand. It was a signal asking me to take him outside for a walk. “Excuse us, Uncle,” I said. “I’d like to take K.K. for a little walk before he has to perform again.”

Choengklong nodded cheerfully, too preoccupied with visions of future profits to notice anything else. I suddenly thought of Wassorn. No surprise at all. With a father that far to the political right, the son had swung wildly to the far left. What a strangely warm family they must be.

The garden in the center of the building was lush and green. The hotel owner clearly loved fragrant flowers, for the grounds were crowded with orange jasmine, orchid trees, and champaca blossoms. Brick walkways wound among clusters of small bluish-gray stones.

As I walked, breathing deeply, the scent of flowers drifted softly around us. My left arm supported K.K. as we made our way through the bushes. The path narrowed beneath overgrown orange jasmine branches, making it feel as though we were walking through a cave. Only moonlight filtered dimly through the leaves. I pushed branches aside to clear the way. Tiny white blossoms rained down, glittering in the moonlight like fallen stardust.

Ahead stood a large stone fountain nearly twice the height of an ordinary man. The sculpture depicted a masked, muscular figure gripping and wrestling a young woman, half her body submerged beneath the water. The form was rough and rugged, yet overflowing with energy. The longer I stared, the more puzzled I became when I noticed the mask was that of a monkey from traditional khon theater. Only after reading the plaque did I realize the statue portrayed Hanuman

and Suvannamaccha. What an imaginative piece. It looked nothing like any monkey warrior and mermaid pairing I had ever seen in Thai art. Water streamed continuously from the sculpture into the pool below. “It’s a fountain,” I whispered to him. K.K. nodded, as though he had already recognized it from the sound of the water when we first entered the garden.

“Will they say something if I touch it?”

I glanced around. No one was nearby. Back in Europe, K.K. had loved sculpture more than anything. But since coming to Thailand, he had hardly had the chance to appreciate local craftsmanship. Most Thai sculpture was religious—Buddhas, deities, sacred figures, revered ancestors. It would have seemed terribly improper for a blond foreigner to go around touching them freely. But surely this one would be fine. I guided his hand toward the sculpture.

Clear water trickled between his fingers as I let him walk slowly around the pool, feeling the texture of the stone, the coolness of the water. The wind rustled through the leaves overhead. The violinist could not stop praising the sculptor’s craftsmanship then he wandered behind the fountain, and only his voice floated back to me.

“You’re worried about your father, aren’t you?”

I reflected on what Uncle Choengklong had said. Just what sort of ties did Father have with people in the Indonesian government? Politics in Java was no different from Thailand—full of undercurrents, coups, and above all, violence. Yet the more unstable politics became, the greater the profits waiting

to be harvested from it.

“Not exactly. Father has always been this way. Always involving himself in things I can never understand.” Ever since I was a kid, whenever I saw newspapers attacking him, I felt uneasy. Right after the end of the war, intellectuals had practically demanded that my father commit suicide for collaborating with the Japanese and causing Free Thai resistance fighters to shed blood. We retreated to Hua Hin and lived quietly there for a while.

During that period Father spent his days doing nothing, just sitting by the beach, counting waves and clouds, listening to classical records, and teaching his daughter how to play chess. Sometimes he would take me driving in his beloved blue automobile, wandering from place to place. It was the same make and color as the car driven by the Thai racer who had once won a grand prize in Europe. Father owned two of them, though one had unfortunately been destroyed by bombing during the war.

We played chess almost every day. Sometimes he intentionally lost. Sometimes he played with his full ability. Occasionally he gave me odds: a pawn, a knight, even a rook. And once in a very great while, though rarely, I defeated him completely and cleanly. One day little Piang-or carried a newspaper article attacking Father to him and demanded that he explain himself and refute it. Father only stroked his daughter's head affectionately and told me that for now I should trust him first. When I grew old enough to

understand the world, then I could judge him freely without fear or obligation.

I remember thinking then: if life could continue forever like that, there was nothing to be sad about. But when Father's former boss began returning to power, he moved back to Phra Nakhon.

"I don't want my dad involving himself in improper things," I murmured. "Like befriending—or working with—villains. Or worse...becoming one himself."

Guests had already begun drifting back into Kannika Hall. The second half of the evening party was about to begin, and K.K. asked me to lead him back to the orchestra.

5

The conductor flicked his baton; the drums struck up a new rhythm. People waited at the edge of the dance floor. The brass section launched into a tango beat. Anyone who still had the energy left took each other by the hand and stepped forward. Some youngsters hung back out of politeness. This was a chance to change partners. Swapping dance partners was perfectly normal; keeping a woman to oneself for too long was considered poor manners—unless the man had brought her to the event himself, in which case it was understood he had already laid claim to her beforehand. Likewise, if a woman refused one man and then went to dance with another, that too was considered impolite.

As half past nine approached, I rested my chin on my hand and stared blankly ahead. Light from the women's jewelry glittered across the dance floor. The brightest of all had to be Wasitthi's yellow sapphire necklace. It was probably the very jewel the newspapers had been gossiping about for quite some time—the one said to have been a tribute from a French merchant to King Narai the Great. As for its price, there was no need to mention it. To spend that much on such a thing... I found it hard to believe. Chatri was hardly a bachelor. His wife was the daughter of the owner of the record company he managed—practically a jackpot herself. A man like him would never agree to a divorce. At most, he might flirt and dote on Wasitthi, but he would never truly possess her. And what did Wasitthi think of all this? Someday, when he eventually abandoned her, would expensive keepsakes be enough consolation?

Anyway, I supposed it was better than what some people might be left with: absolutely nothing. The violin wailed mournfully...

I turned my gaze elsewhere and saw Chatri sitting alone at a table, quietly sipping his drink. How strange. That meant Wasitthi was dancing with another man. The conductor spun his baton again, and the music shifted from common time into triple meter.

A Viennese waltz. One...two...three... one...two... three...A young stranger approached and bowed.

"I can't dance," I said.

“That is all right. I can lead.”

He took my hand and guided me onto the floor. And he really could lead. Under normal circumstances, I could probably have muddled through well enough with him. But tonight my mind was somewhere else. I kept stepping on feet, bumping into people left and right. I could barely even count the rhythm; one, two, three, correctly. He must have been thoroughly upset. But out of courtesy, at the very least, we had to wait until the song ended.

When the music finally softened, we both breathed a sigh of relief. He escorted me back to my table. People gradually drifted off the dance floor. A slender figure stood alone in the middle of the polished wood floor. It was Wasitthi. Whispers rippled through the crowd. The young woman stood there by herself, as though waiting for someone. Even the orchestra had stopped playing. She swayed like a pine tree bending in the wind, eyes closed in a dreamy haze. A faint cough escaped her lips. Her skin was pale as paper—no, paler than that. So white it seemed her whole body reflected the light around her. Her arms spread slightly, like a bird attempting to take flight, but her legs stumbled weakly beneath her. Before anyone could rush forward to catch her, the young woman collapsed onto the floor. The entire room drew in its breath.

Someone ran over to look. I recognized him as the same young man whose feet I had trampled during the dance. He bent over her body, then turned toward me, his face drained

of color. Even before I heard him speak, I already knew what he was about to announce.

6

A shriek rang out from somewhere in the room.

People leapt to their feet so abruptly that tables crashed over in succession. Someone shouted, “Bandit attack!” Guests fled in utter chaos. I stood frozen, unable to do anything, hoping someone would quickly take control of the situation.

The young man who had been kneeling in the center of the room sprang toward the doorway. He urged everyone to remain calm, explaining that the police would arrive shortly and that the authorities might need to question everyone here. While speaking, he signaled discreetly to an employee to place an emergency telephone call. Many guests protested. Several important-looking figures simply walked out without paying any attention to him. The young man persisted, coaxing and reassuring them however he could. “Please, believe me,” he said. “This isn’t the work of bandits...Miss Wasitthi may have suffered from some illness... Assisting the authorities is the duty of every good citizen.”

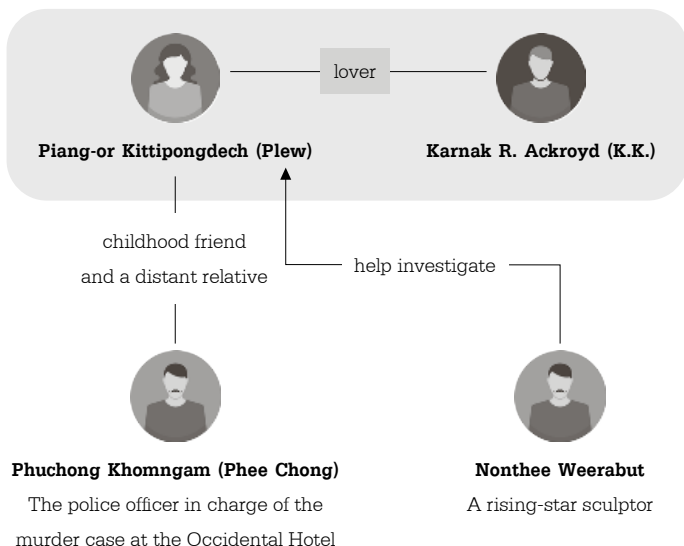
I heard sobbing so intense it sounded as though someone’s heart was breaking. Turning, I saw Waricha buried in Watinee’s embrace. She looked ready to throw herself toward her eldest sister, but the middle sister held her back. As for Chatri, he sat pale-faced, both hands hidden beneath

the table. Forks and spoons lay scattered across the dishes before him. Empty glasses and half-finished drinks crowded the table. He stared at the corpse, rose unsteadily like a puppet whose strings had slackened, then collapsed beside Wasitthi's body. His shoulders trembled violently.

Amid the uproar and confusion, one man's expression differed from everyone else's. It was the face of someone familiar with death. Jongkol—the military officer escorting Watinee—stood upright, sweeping his gaze across the room before stopping at the young woman's body. I noticed the look on his face. He raised an eyebrow in suspicion, as though he saw something...or perhaps noticed the absence of something.

I craned my neck to look more closely. Wasitthi lay curled up like a fetus in the womb, her hair spilling over her shoulders and face. Vomit stained the corner of her mouth. One of her earrings had rolled near her hand, probably shaken loose when she hit the floor. But what caught my attention was something else. Something that wasn't there. The yellow sapphire necklace Wasitthi had been wearing—where had it gone?

Character Chart



Other Individuals Connected to the Case



The Three Plengnakorn Sisters



Wasitthi



Watinee



Waricha

companion



Jongkol Anusorn

A Staff Lieutenant and expert marksman.
He was wounded during the Korean War
and had to take a leave of absence from
military service for medical treatment

teaches
Ballroom
dancing



Thanongkiat Kanghan (Luang Pradit)

A charming con artist
who ingratiates himself with
Wasitthi for certain personal gains

Yot Dome Records Company



Chatri Panpeek

Company president and one of
Thailand's wealthiest magnates

Husband - Wife



Khapkaew Lomphen

The true power behind the
company, using her husband's
name as a facade