

THE BORDER

Conner rolled his shoulder blades against his airplane seat, shifting the hashish he'd banded tight around his ribs, and still he itched. What kind of idiot was he? Some white-toothed chatterbox in an airless Bangkok drug alley tells him the packaging will fool the airport dogs and Conner believes him? And now here he was, planted in a window seat flying straight, no doubt, toward Japanese jail at five hundred and fifty-five miles an hour.

A soft warning bell sounded overhead and the fasten-seat-belts light went on as a female voice announced the plane's descent into Tokyo-Narita in Thai, Japanese and English. Beneath Conner's yellow business shirt, the plastic buckle of the belt was snagging against his skin, daring him to unbuckle it.

"You okay?" the guy next to him asked.

Conner glanced at the man. White. Medium build. Dark haired, like Conner. Perhaps a few years older. He was awfully good looking, but Conner couldn't risk interacting with anyone. Conner nodded. "Fine." His shoulders cramped and the too-short strap drove into a space between two ribs he

hadn't known was there. He felt like a penned-up calf on slaughter day.

The guy stuck out his hand across the empty seat between them. "Matt." He had a rich, rumbling baritone, a Midwest American accent straight off TV. So unlike Conner's old-school L.A. drawl—more Okie than Valley Girl—that English-school owners found so distressingly unintelligible.

Conner shook Matt's hand. The guy's grip was firm, his hand warm. Conner wanted to hang on to it for a week.

"You work in Tokyo?" Matt asked.

"Ikari Bank." Something about the word *bank*, Conner had found, killed conversations, and as much as he liked hearing that resonant voice, he needed to smother this interchange in its crib.

The guy straightened up in his seat. "Survived the great 'crash' of 1990, did you?" He made quotation-mark signs with his fingers, as though he didn't believe the stock market had plunged by half. "We're partnering with Ikari. I'm at the American Embassy, on contract." He laughed. "Working with the Ministry of Finance, liberalization, that sort of thing. What are you in? M&A? Commercial paper?" Matt crossed his legs, letting one leather-clad foot stick out into the aisle.

Ah, *gaijin* salaryman, Conner thought. Tokyo was still crawling with these educated American fortune seekers, despite the meltdown. Not aimless chuckleheads like himself but kids who did things like intern, interview and tell amusing stories about . . . well, who knows what. Conner wasn't "amusing." He had prepared a story about selling traveler's checks for Ikari, but now sat in awkward silence because he couldn't carry the lie very far and the guy had a firm grip that he wanted to feel again.

Matt's foot caught the skirt of a Thai flight attendant as she hustled up the narrow pathway to her station. He jerked his

head in a very small bow and lifted his hand in a slight reverse karate chop of wordless apology. It was an effortlessly Japanese gesture for an American and made Conner kind of enviously hate him. The flight attendant turned to smile at Matt, her teeth as deep white and perfect as the Bangkok drug dealer's. Matt's dark green eyes sparkled back.

"Damn, Skippy," he whispered to Conner as she sashayed up the aisle. "Sexy," he growled, pitching his voice low.

Conner exhaled, shrinking his lungs to relieve the bite of the strap. To come out or not come out? Conner watched the woman dip to pick up a stray headset from a seat cushion and noted that he *did* feel a spark of excitement as he looked at her. Maybe it was time for a different sort of coming out. "You know, I guess she is."

"You guess?"

"I'm new at this."

Matt looked at Conner. Conner could see his mind was trying to figure out what Conner had just said.

Conner's ears buzzed, blood pressure rising. If he could risk carrying drugs through customs, could he not risk a little honesty? It was the nineties now; times had changed. "Always thought I was just gay." His throat stumbled on the word *gay*, so laden with power. "But I'm going out with a woman for the first time." Ah, Katie. *Going out* definitely wasn't the phrase. Katie didn't think much of Conner; they only had sex, really, which was about the last thing he'd ever expected. But he liked it. Quite a bit.

Matt shifted back in his seat. Not a good sign, but sometimes it took people a moment to get over the surprise. Matt recrossed his khaki-sheathed legs and drummed his fingers on his knee.

The buckle of Conner's chest pack crabbed into his back, a fingernail on a fleshy chalkboard. He internally thanked Matt

for taking his mind off it for so long. He'd picked up the pack in an open-air Bangkok market yesterday. It was emblazoned with an already peeling Louis Vuitton insignia and the proud statement, *Happyness of life is satiety. My shoes.* It sounded like something Conner would have come up with.

Matt glanced at him, but nervously. Never mind. Conner wasn't sure what he thought of himself either. Sleeping with a woman hadn't made him any less attracted to men. But Katie had made a move one night, and he'd wondered if anything had changed since high school. It had. So, was he going to be a different person now? The experience now had him thinking: was he a person, or just a bunch of behaviors? Hello, I'd like you to meet my friend Conner. He's a behavior.

Conner stared out the window as the coast appeared. The outskirts of greater Tokyo were just visible at the edge of the wintry brown countryside outside Narita. Somewhere out there was Mount Fuji. Lots of people saw it on the approach but Conner never had.

The wing flaps rose and the engines began to scream, setting off a scream inside Conner as well. Shining beads scrawled across his oval plastic window. All it took for Conner to land in prison was for one Japanese policeman to look at this scrawny twenty-five-year-old in a pin-striped suit and butter-toned shirt and ask, Is he stupid enough to lash a kilo of hash to his chest?

The plane dropped.

Thump. Touchdown. Thump again, the final touchdown, a soft, cracking sound of settling plastic, and then the engines really howled. Conner clutched the arms of his seat and looked at green-eyed Matt.

Matt batted his ticket folder against his leg, hair-topped knuckles tapping his solid thigh in a forceful pattern.