



CHAPTER 2

It was nearing midnight when Chris arrived at Singapore's Changi Airport. A tall attractive young woman of Indian descent intercepted him as he emerged groggily from the customs clearing station.

"Mr. Gates. I'm Shikha Patel of the Ministry of Defense," she introduced herself while handing him a generic business card. "I'm to ensure you get settled into your apartment."

"I have an apartment?" he asked coyly.

She flashed a vague, tolerant smile. "Yes. Would you please follow me? Your luggage has already been taken care of," she added blithely. He followed her from the terminal to a Toyota van parked illegally in the passenger pickup area.

Racing down the deserted East Coast Parkway, she maintained a running tutorial on Singapore's modern infrastructure.

"Look, I appreciate the tour," Chris interrupted politely as she paused for a breath. "But I've been here before, so

please don't feel it's necessary." Shikha lapsed into a sullen silence.

"Yes. I realize you've been here before, *Captain*," she said finally. "But at the time you were a '*businessman*'." she said with a smirk, watching him closely for a reaction.

"I was – I am – a businessman," Chris yawned. "My company was bidding on a contract to provide billing system integration services to SingTel."

She snorted dismissively, her eyes surveying the road ahead.

"Shikha, my country is at war," he said tiredly. "I happen to be here now as a mobilized reservist. Don't be paranoid."

"Fine," she said with exaggerated condescension. After several more minutes of silence, she continued. "Strangely, *our* records indicate Centennial Systems never *did* business in Singapore, *Captain*."

"It's called 'losing the bid', Shikha," he said irritably. "If you'd spend some time in the private sector you'd understand the concept. ...And I would appreciate it if you would stop repeating *Captain* as if it was a nasty word. It's rude."

"Excuse me, *Sir*," she said and fell silent. Chris watched her, eyes fixed on the road as if she were merely a disinterested chauffeur. He reached into his pocket and withdrew the card she'd handed him at the airport. It contained no job title.

"So, Shikha. What do you do for the Ministry of Defense?" he asked in a mocking voice. "*Protocol*?"

"Touché," she answered with a smirk. "Mainly I babysit foreign spies."

Chris chuckled. "Well that's a relief. Good of you to help-out on your night off."

Moments later the car drew into the circular driveway of an elegant high-rise apartment building. "This building caters to foreign corporate executives," she said as he

emerged from the car. "So please *do* introduce yourself using your cover." Chris rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"Aren't you coming up to tuck me in?" he asked.

"A car from SID will retrieve you from the American Embassy tomorrow morning at 08:00," she said dryly. "Is there anything you'd like me to keep under lock and key for you?"

"No thank you. You've been *most* helpful," he said sarcastically. The van pulled away and disappeared down the abandoned street. He turned and recovered his luggage, heading for the front desk.

Alone in his apartment, Chris explored his new home. Furnished in classic European decor, it had blonde hardwood floors and modern Scandinavian-style furniture. Glancing up at the ornate light fixture in the ceiling, he wondered if someone really *was* recording his actions and immediately resolved not to sleep in the nude. The thought of some police bureaucrat reviewing nude tapes of him left a sour feeling in the pit of his stomach.

He unzipped his suit bag and arranged his clothes in the built-in armoire covering one entire wall of his bedroom. Then he reached into his pocket, withdrew his cell phone and passed through the sliding glass doors onto the balcony. Even at this early hour of the morning the atmosphere was viscous.

He dialed the back-door U.S. Embassy number from memory and placed the phone to his ear. There were several clicks followed by a steady tone. Using the keypad, he input a series of numbers, disconnecting when the tone changed to a beep. The numerically-coded message was simple: I've arrived.

Monday morning, SID sent an unmarked car with a single driver to retrieve Chris from the palatial Mandarin building that was the U.S. Embassy. He slipped into the back seat with a large, plain, double wrapped brown envelope

containing the classified briefing in his locked briefcase. The car moved nimbly through the early morning traffic with an ease that made him wonder if there were some discreet markings on the vehicle encouraging people to move from its path. Beside him on the seat was the English language Indonesian newspaper, The Jakarta Post. Glancing at the front page, he wondered if it was left intentionally:

SINGAPORE ROUNDS UP ALLEGED TERRORISTS

(AP) JAKARTA – Based on information supplied by U.S. intelligence, Singapore has been arresting Al Qa’ida linked extremists, said an unnamed U.S. official.

The information, allegedly contained in videotape discovered by U.S. troops in Afghanistan, purports to show American facilities in Singapore being cased by members of a previously unknown group called Jemmah Islamiya...

He sighed and shook his head – a leak. “This is going to be a long fucking day,” he sighed.

“Sir?” the driver said.

“Nothing,” Chris responded. “I’m just wondering what time I’ll need to leave to catch the next flight back to Honolulu.”

The car rolled through a residential neighborhood filled with high-rise apartments and into a large, well-kept commons. Winding through the tree-lined park, it pulled up in front of what appeared to be a plantation surrounded by tall, dense hedges. A military policeman, assault rifle dangling from a sling over his shoulder, stepped from the

guardhouse, checked the driver's ID card, and smartly waved them through.

As they proceeded up the curved driveway a large, modern white marble and glass office complex came into view. Uniformed and civilian personnel walked purposefully between buildings. A sign on the right side of the driveway indicated they had arrived at Headquarters, Singapore Ministry of Defense. As Chris studied the scene, the car slowed and abruptly dodged left into an unmarked opening in one of the dissecting hedges. Another MP waved the car into a clearing filled with parked vehicles around an unadorned white building.

This was SID headquarters.

As Chris emerged from the car, a tall, austere-looking man stepped forward and offered his hand.

"Captain Gates?" he asked crisply.

"Yes, Sir," Chris replied as he shook the man's hand.

"I'll be your escort. Please follow me." He escorted Chris through security and into a three-story atrium to a bank of elevators. As they awaited the elevator, Chris examined the two-story floor to ceiling abstract painting dominating the atrium.

"Intriguing, isn't it?" his escort observed. "It represents the many facets of intelligence."

"Yes, quite," Chris agreed, not entirely sure what the grids, dots and squiggly lines were meant to represent. He assumed that *was* the point.

The elevator carried them several levels below ground, where he followed his host to a large, high-tech conference room.

Several analysts milled around a stainless steel teacart laden with coffee, tea and small cakes. He recognized one of them.

"Hi Shikha," Chris said as he slipped-up beside her and grasped a pastry. "Seen any spies lately?" he asked

conspiratorially. She gave him a sour look and shook his hand.

“*Captain*,” she mocked with a smile at their mutual joke and introduced him to the other analysts.

They all appeared quite young. *Probably their second-string*, Chris noted with well-concealed disappointment as he alternately shook hands and bowed to his counterparts. Besides Shikha, only one of the remaining five analysts was female. All appeared to be of Chinese or Indian descent, he observed. None appeared to be Malay, the dominant ancestry on the peninsula. He couldn’t help but wonder at the significance.

Fortunately, he soon discovered his assumptions were incorrect. These *were* the senior analysts, each a specialist on nations of interest to Singapore. He recalled reading somewhere that youth is a valued commodity in the Republic. While the elders retain quiet overall control, young people are rapidly placed in positions of responsibility. The relative youth standing around him seemed to confirm it.

He also noticed the Chinese woman appeared to be in charge - clearly, sexism wasn’t an issue at SID. She introduced herself as Jessica Ling, the senior Indonesia analyst.

Encased in a smart navy blue suit and high heels, her lithe body moved like a cat as she stepped from the darkened room to the floodlit podium to formally open the session. As she spoke in a British-educated accent, he was distracted by the way her high, elegant cheekbones bracketed expressive almond shaped eyes; her full, slightly pouting lips moved sensuously, in strange contrast to the academic tenor of her presentation. Her short jet-black hair made her appear younger than what he supposed was her thirty-five years, but as an elegantly-manicured hand swept across the pages of her notes, she slipped-on a pair of reading glasses that gave her an older, more intellectual air.

Despite her beauty, there was something intimidating about her, aloof, not quite cold but definitely on the chilly side - like some stern headmistress at an English girl's school. In his trance, he missed all but the gist of her few, perfunctory comments regarding shared values and the common threat before realizing she was turning the podium over to him.

Approaching the front of the room, he was painfully conscious of her eyes fixed critically upon him. He stumbled uneasily over his opening comments, noting the restrained smirk on her face. Overcoming his unease, he directed his attention to the other analysts who were leaning forward in their seats, soaking in every detail as he presented what the U.S. knew of the scattered remnants of the JI organization.

"On a related matter," Chris began tentatively as he withdrew a report from within the specially marked envelope the admiral had provided. "We understand there was a recent 'incident' resulting in the deaths of several SID operatives." The flashing eyes and sudden murmurs filling the room confirmed he was indeed treading in sensitive territory.

Jessica went pale. "Your information is incorrect," she declared. "There has been no 'incident' in Singapore."

"I'm glad to hear it," he responded softly. "Then presenting my report on the source of the explosives would be unnecessary." He slid the report back into its plain brown wrapper. Jessica glanced sharply at Shikha, who shrugged helplessly.

"Of course, if there are explosives known to be circulating in the region, we would be interested in knowing where they came from," Jessica added in a forced, neutral voice.

Chris nodded and reproduced the report. "The explosive was Semtex, a Czech-made product created by combining Cyclonite and Pentaerythrite into a relatively stable gelatinized explosive," he read. "Based on the metallic and odor 'fingerprint' associated with each lot, the explosive

believed used in ... recent events,” he said generically, “was produced by Synthesia in 1996.” He turned the page, glancing up at the uneasy stares of the assembled analysts.

“The 10-metric ton lot was delivered to the Republic of Iraq in 1998,” he continued, “allegedly for use in oil exploration and demolition of structures left ‘unstable’ as a result of the 1991 Gulf War. We believe that in July of 2001, a portion of that lot was shipped out of Basra, Iraq on the Cypriot-owned, Cambodian flagged vessel M.V. Arassa, arriving at Port Klang, Malaysia on August 5th. Through a series of cutouts, it appears the JI’s bomb-maker, Khalid, obtained 226 Kilograms of the Semtex from a contact at the port authority. He had the explosives woven inside lightweight vests by a tailor in Kulai.”

He glanced up from his notes. From the tragic expressions on the faces of his fellow analysts, Chris knew he’d struck fertile ground. “We believe the vests were delivered by truck across the Johor causeway to a Singaporean import/export company called East Asia Imports, owned by an Indonesian national named Kastari Bin Ali.”

When he finished speaking, the analysts looked imploringly to Jessica. “I have only one question,” she said.

“Yes?”

“What is the date of your information?”

He flipped to the back page and read the ‘Information Cutoff Date’. “Three days ago,” he answered.

Jessica nodded and sighed, “thank you.”

Chris left the podium, dropped into his seat and looked up expectantly, prepared for the reciprocal briefing. But to his surprise, the analysts stood as one, smiled tensely and disappeared single-file from the room, leaving Chris alone with his escort.

“What now?” Chris asked, staring blankly around the conference room.

“We are through,” the man announced.

Chris stood. "No," he said. "I don't think we are."

The man stood and limped forward from the shadows, his craggy face sharpening at he stepped into the light. "Pardon?"

"This was to be an *exchange*," Chris insisted, anger rising in his voice. "No such thing has taken place."

The man, taken aback at Chris' brusqueness, blurted something in Mandarin then caught himself and switched quickly back to English. "It will take time," he purred soothingly. "This was a *good start*."

"For you, yes," Chris said coldly. "For the United States, I'd say it's been a waste of effort."

The man went rigid. "Well. Your – people – haven't shown themselves particularly adept at keeping secrets, have they?"

Realizing his mission was now in jeopardy; Chris threw caution to the wind.

"Sir, you know that leak didn't come from Pacific Command," he said slowly, trying to control his temper as he slid his notes into the envelope marked SECRET//REL SGP. "It came from some glory-seeking politician."

"None-the-less," he interrupted. "That 'premature' revelation exposed an ongoing operation. Suspects fled. That *cannot* happen again!"

"Look, I can't fix what's happened in the past. I was sent to ensure that information *you* provide goes only to the J2. That's as compartmentalized as it can be. If Colonel Mok trusts her, you'll have to trust me."

"He may trust her, but he doesn't *know* you."

"Then I'd say the relationship is over before it has started."

"That is not for you to decide, *Captain*," he scoffed.

Chris frowned and leaned across the table, fixing his host with steely blue eyes.

"Sir," he repeated. "I'm a reservist. If the Admiral wants to send me home to my comfortable civilian job, that's her

privilege. I'm here because a bunch of extremists declared war on my country – *and yours*. My job is to exchange intelligence and if you don't want to play, I have damned little to lose by telling you to *get stuffed*."

With that, he stood, stuffed the classified briefing unceremoniously into his briefcase, and stalked to the door.

"Now I'm ready to leave, Sir," he said, his eyes focused on the exit.

The man remained motionless.

Chris chanced to look over his shoulder. "Sir?" he repeated.

"Sit down, Chris," the man said resignedly, motioning to Chris' previously occupied seat. Chris thought he detected a hint of amusement in the old man's expressive eyes.

After glaring at his host for a few seconds, Chris turned and walked slowly back to his seat. The man pressed a button on the speaker box, saying nothing. Moments later, the six analysts returned to the room. A PowerPoint briefing flashed on the luminous screen at the front of the room. As if without interruption, Jessica pulled a telescoping pointer from her jacket pocket and stepped to the podium.

"We agree with your assessment; Khalid was operating in Johor. However, recent information places several of his confederates here..."

After a meticulous briefing, the substance of which he probed thoroughly, the analysts shook hands with Chris and bowed politely, broad smiles all around. Jessica offered her hand; he was surprised by the firmness of her grip.

"Well done, Captain," she offered. "Your agency seems to have overcome its chronic ignorance of the threats against you."

He stared at her, stunned by her backhanded compliment. "My agency?"

"Yes. The CIA," she challenged.

"I'm Army, Ms. Ling," he corrected.

“Of course you are,” she purred condescendingly before turning and strolling out the door.

As the last of the analysts left the room, Shikha took up the rear, winking conspiratorially at Chris, conveying in her own way the exchange was a success.

“Come,” the old man said, slipping his arm through Chris’. He led Chris upstairs through security into the sweltering afternoon sun. As they stood outside in the tropical heat awaiting the car and driver from the SID motor pool, the man turned and peered wryly at Chris.

“Chris, you remind me of that quality I so much admire in Americans,” he announced.

“What’s that, Sir?”

“No ‘bullshit,’” he said with a grin.

Chris stared bemusedly at the craggy old man.

“Who *are* you?” he asked.

The old man looked up with a twinkle in his hawk-like eyes.

“My name is Mok,” he said. “Colonel Jimmy Mok.”

From that point forward the exchange burgeoned.

Chris soon found most significant intelligence was passed informally, usually under the guise of a casual conversation over drinks at any one of a number of bars in Singapore’s fashionable Marina district.

It was during these exchanges that Chris’ control over his mission began to slip imperceptibly from his grip.

Had he not been so desperately lonely he might never have stumbled over the chink in Jessica’s formidable armor. But over the course of numerous “unofficial” gatherings with the SID analysts, he noticed her painfully appropriate demeanor soften. On several occasions, he was embarrassed when she caught him watching her. But instead of the withering stare he expected, she blushed and glanced away with uncharacteristic timidity.

Scenes of Jessica began to invade his sleep; shocking, intimate dreams that bled over into his otherwise public encounters with her and the other analysts. He became self-conscious, fearing she might sense his growing obsession. But the admiral had been explicit – be wary of SID. So he checked his libido and focused on the mission.

One evening the group met at a nightclub on Clarke Quay clearly geared for more youthful clientele. Shikha was the instigator, declaring they needed a *real* night on the town – no business; just play.

Arriving outside the bar that evening, Chris was stunned by the appearance of the attractive Indian analyst with the alluring brown eyes and puckish sense of humor. Already tall, her height was accented by high-heeled sandals and a pair of hip-hugging jeans that clung to her long, well turned legs. Smooth cocoa colored abs and a pierced navel peeked from beneath her short tank top.

Jessica's conservative slacks and silk blouse, if not accenting her feminine form, did nothing to disguise her svelte runner's body. He wondered if her ubiquitous spiked heels were an affectation to close the height difference between them, but quickly dismissed such thoughts as figments of his own unrealized fantasies.

Soon after the group of intelligence officers secured a table at the edge of the dance floor, Jessica's cell phone rang. She bent low to the table, pressing the device to her ear and plugging the other with her finger in a futile bid for silence.

"Come," Shikha purred, grasping Chris' hand and dragging him toward the dance floor. "Let's dance. We'll see if we can make *your* Jessica jealous."

"What?" Chris asked in bewilderment as he stumbled reluctantly toward the crowd gyrating on the parquet floor. "My Jessica? What are you talking about?"

Shikha laughed, draped her arms loosely around his neck, and began swaying her hips alluringly to the music. "You are two of a kind," she teased. "Neither of you belong

in places like this,” she observed, surveying the neon lights and lasers. “You can’t even dance,” she laughed throatily. “But you never miss an opportunity to go out with us – especially when Jessica’s along.”

He felt his face burn. “Maybe it’s my job,” he growled defensively.

“You sound just like her,” she laughed. “I’ve seen the way you look at each other when the other isn’t watching. She’s beautiful, isn’t she?”

He didn’t answer at first, glaring defiantly at his tormentor. Then, “Yes,” he admitted finally.

“She shouldn’t be alone anymore,” Shikha explained vaguely. “God gives food to every bird, but does not throw it into the nest.”

Chris looked at her inquiringly. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s an old Hindi proverb,” she explained. “You’re a bright guy. Figure it out.” She pulled him closer and began to writhe in his arms.

Her eyes cut back to the table. “She’s watching us now,” Shikha murmured conspiratorially in his ear. “What are you going to do about it?”

“What am I *supposed* to do about it?” he hissed. Her eyes kept wandering to where Jessica was sitting before flitting inquisitively back to him. Finally, he could no longer resist. He glanced toward the table in time to see Jessica stand up, sling her purse over her shoulder and stalk purposefully toward the exit.

“Damn!” he swore and slid from Shikha’s arms, fighting his way through the crowd in pursuit of Jessica. Over the heads of the crowd on the dance floor, he spotted her closing rapidly on the front door.

“Excuse me,” he blurted as he stumbled into a small clutch of girls dancing together. “Please, I...” he started as a young woman grasped his arm and urged him back toward the writhing mass. Mercifully his arm slid from her sweaty

grip and he bolted toward the doors through which Jessica had disappeared. He burst from the club onto the crowded quay, glancing rabidly across a sea of late night partiers. He found her standing at a quayside railing, staring enviously across the water at the reflected lights of the city.

He took several deep breaths and approached her cautiously; unsure what to do now that he was at the precipice. "Jessica," he said in a low voice as he stepped beside her and leaned on the railing. She glanced at him, and turned away.

"Jessica. Why did you leave?" he pressed.

She shook her head, still avoiding his gaze. "It's late," she responded with a lame shrug. "I have to go." As she began to leave, he reached out instinctively and grasped her arm. In a blinding flash, she spun, knocking loose his grip in one smooth professional blocking movement. He deflected her follow-up slap.

Plastic chairs clattered onto the cobblestone quay. People seated nearby stared in muted shock at the sudden eruption. Chris and Jessica stood glaring at each other.

"What do you *want* from me?" she demanded angrily.

"Just you," he said softly. "Only you."

Breathing heavily, her eyes fixed upon him. "*Why?*" she implored.

He shook his head, amazed it wasn't obvious in the way he looked at her, the way he became tongue-tied in her presence. "Because you're homely and stupid," he responded finally.

Her eyes widened as she stifled a startled laugh.

"And because when I close my eyes I can feel the subtle curve of your spine against my fingers; smell the musk of your arousal; taste the sweet perspiration inside your thigh..."

Her hand moved slowly to her gaping mouth as he continued.

“But mainly because I see you here and I can’t touch you,” he whispered, “though I want to desperately.”

Her hand dropped from her mouth; she licked her lips nervously. Staring into his honest, strikingly blue eyes she muttered weakly, “I’m not allowed.”

“Neither am I,” he responded, placing his hand cautiously on her arm. Her muscles tensed beneath her sleeve then went suddenly slack.

“Where do you want to go?” she breathed.

“Anywhere,” he moaned.

Taking his hand in her sweating palm, “Come. I know a place,” she announced huskily and led him across the quay toward her parked car.