



“First-rate fiction. Let’s hope Palmer
has a sequel in the works.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review
of *The American Mission*

SECRETS OF STATE

A NOVEL

MATTHEW PALMER

ALSO BY MATTHEW PALMER

The American Mission



SECRETS of STATE

MATTHEW PALMER

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS NEW YORK

PUTNAM

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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Version_1

*For my father, Michael Stephen Palmer.
Thanks, Dad.*

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[EPILOGUE](#)

“I continue to be much more concerned, when it comes to our security, with the prospect of a nuclear weapon going off in Manhattan.”

—*Barack Obama*

“Given current policies and practices, a nuclear terrorist attack that devastates one of the great cities of the world is inevitable. In my judgment, if governments do no more and no less than they are doing today, the odds of such an event within a decade are more than 50 percent.”

—*Graham Allison*
Harvard Kennedy School of Government

“A more rational anti-terrorism policy would focus resources heavily, perhaps almost exclusively, on threats of nuclear and weapons of mass destruction terror.”

—*Nate Silver*
Probability Guru

INDIA AND PAKISTAN



DULLES, VIRGINIA

PROLOGUE

It is not an especially large weapon, as such things go. But then again, there really is no such thing as a small nuclear bomb, just one of which, as the bumper stickers had it, can ruin your whole day. The simple gun-type enriched uranium warhead generates an explosive force of some one hundred and fifty tons of TNT. Some of the larger thermonuclear bombs in the American or Russian arsenal, the strategic city busters, weigh in at twenty or thirty megatons. This bomb, however, belongs to one of the alphabet soup of Middle Eastern terrorist groups rather than to a superpower. For their purposes, it is more than adequate. Nor does the group's membership—those who are not themselves incinerated in the initial fireball—mind especially that they could not arrange for the airburst at three thousand feet that would have maximized both the blast damage and the radiation effects of the bomb. Their delivery vehicle is an old Ford panel van parked in front of the Empire State Building near the corner of Thirty-fourth Street and Fifth Avenue.

One second after the small explosion that shoots a subcritical cylinder of highly enriched uranium onto a matching uranium spike, a shock wave with an overpressure of twenty pounds per square inch has reached out four-tenths of a mile from the square meter of Manhattan that instantly and irrevocably wrests the title of Ground Zero from the World Trade Center. The 102-story-tall Empire State Building disintegrates. The fifteen thousand or so people who work there and several hundred assorted tourists waiting patiently for their turn to see the fabled views on what had been a sparkling clear day die instantly, vaporized by the eight thousand-degree heat or crushed by hurtling chunks of rock and metal. Other iconic buildings within the blast zone fare no better. The New York Public Library, Penn Station, and Madison Square Garden are transformed into indistinguishable piles of radioactive rubble. At midday, there are nearly eighty thousand people within a circle with a radius of .4 mile from Ground Zero. Not a single one survives.

Four seconds after critical mass, the shock wave—now reduced to a mere ten psi—has traveled nearly a mile from Ground Zero. The thermal pulse ignites thousands of fires, most of which are promptly snuffed out by the blast wave. It is a small mercy. The top thirty stories are blown off the Chrysler Building. Even so, the misshapen stump of the art deco landmark is once again the tallest building in Midtown. The glass-and-steel UN headquarters building on First Avenue at Forty-fifth Street is a multinational deathtrap. Viktor Janukovski, the newly elected Secretary-General of the United Nations, is torn to pieces by flying glass and decapitated by his own iMac. The steel frame of the building remains largely intact. Ten blocks to the south, however, Bellevue Hospital has been leveled. There are now more than three hundred thousand dead.

Six seconds after detonation, the ring of destruction reaches out a mile and a half from the Empire State Building. At the outer edge of the ring, the blast wave has dropped to five psi, enough to blow

out all of the windows at Lincoln Center. Carnegie Hall is on fire. The thermal pulse is still strong enough to kill anyone in the direct line of sight. Approximately thirty thousand people perish in exactly this fashion. All together, another two hundred thousand people die in this ring.

The iconic mushroom cloud now hovers like a specter over New York City. Radioactive fallout . . .

. . .

“Damn. The system froze again.” Dr. Adam Birnbaum looked up from the screen where a computer-generated image of a devastated New York City was overlaid with graphs and charts offering arcane technical details about pressure waves and radiation levels. Although he knew his way around a database and understood the fundamentals of nuclear fission, Dr. Birnbaum’s field of specialty was neither computer science nor atomic physics. He was a political scientist, widely recognized as one of the world’s leading academic authorities on terrorism.

“That can’t happen on Thursday,” said James Smith, who was the interface between Birnbaum and the source of funding for the project to which he had dedicated the last three years of his life. The Cassandra Project had started at DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. When it began to produce results, the enigmatic Mr. Smith had taken over responsibility from DARPA. Perhaps the best word to describe their new paymaster was, somewhat ironically, *nondescript*. He was a gray man in a gray suit with gray hair that was neither short nor long. Even his skin had a grayish tinge, like that of a chameleon on a concrete wall. According to his business card, Mr. Smith represented a private consulting company called Agilent Industries that had the contract with DARPA to manage the project. Birnbaum had been in and around the Washington establishment for long enough to know that this was horseshit. Mr. Smith was with one of the various U.S. clandestine intelligence services with their own complex ecologies. And if his name was Smith, then Birnbaum would eat his hat. Whoever he worked for, Smith was able to provide the kind of computing power that made the project possible. Birnbaum did not particularly care if the money for the project came from Agilent Industries or the Central Intelligence Agency. In the end, what did it matter?

One of the first things Agilent had done after taking control of the project was to move Cassandra from downtown D.C. to a bland office park off the Dulles toll road. This was consistent with the division of spoils among researchers in the metro Washington region. Suburban Maryland, with the National Institutes of Health and a plethora of advanced genetics labs, had a virtual monopoly on the life sciences. Northern Virginia got the death sciences.

Birnbaum’s research was at the cutting edge of modeling for complex social behaviors. There was no behavior more complex in his view than political violence. Complex, however, was not the same thing as unpredictable. The behaviors involved could be disaggregated, expressed as algorithms, and—with enough computing power—modeled. At least that’s what Birnbaum had set out to prove. He was starting at the top of the Richter scale. The nightmare scenario. The Cassandra Project was focused exclusively on how different terrorist groups might acquire and utilize one or more nuclear weapons on American soil.

“What’s Thursday?” Birnbaum asked.

“You’re demonstrating Cassandra to the board of directors,” Smith replied with equanimity. “The full dog-and-pony.”

“That’s in three days. We’re not ready,” said Dr. Dora Karamanolis, Birnbaum’s primary collaborator on the Cassandra Project. She was a computer scientist and, in addition to designing the hardware, Karamanolis had also developed the programs that modeled Birnbaum’s behavioral algorithms. The diminutive Greek was Birnbaum’s physical and temperamental opposite. The corpulent Birnbaum tipped the scales at more than two hundred and fifty pounds. Karamanolis barely

broke triple digits and had the delicate bone structure of a bird. Where the political scientist was pugnacious and short-tempered and—he would have been the first to admit—somewhat slovenly, Karamanolis was preternaturally calm and precise almost to the point at which it would have been considered a disorder. She was enormously proud of her brainchild. Cassandra's existence was classified. But if the project had been stacked against the competition, Karamanolis was confident the trailer-truck-size Cassandra would be among the five fastest supercomputers on the planet.

"You will be ready," Smith said. It was not phrased as encouragement. It was a command. Everything Smith said was a command.

Karamanolis shook her head. "The hardware is ready, but we are still having trouble with the graphics software. It's just too much data, even for Cassandra. We could mock something up with stock footage, but otherwise there's no guarantee we can avoid another system freeze."

"Stock footage would defeat the purpose of the program," Birnbaum interjected. "We're modeling the real world and trying to capture all of the variables. Everything from how the bad guys acquire the weapons, to how they use them, to an assessment of the fallout. Political as well as radiological. That way, when we alter the input variables, we can model probable outcomes and assess risk. If al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb gets ahold of a bomb, the mullahs are likely to use it in a considerably different way than the Haqqani network would. There are thousands of variables that we need to account for. Stock is the opposite of that. You only get out what you put in. You can't adjust the variables and there's no room for serendipity."

"The board isn't terribly interested in serendipity," Smith observed. "They understand the science, but they're not looking for variables so much as they are constants."

"What do you mean?" Birnbaum asked. In their nearly two years of association, this was the first time that Smith had said anything about the nature of the "board of directors" responsible for Cassandra's continued funding. If there was an opportunity to learn something useful about the keepers of the cash, Birnbaum wanted to seize it.

"Variables lend themselves to scenarios," Smith explained. "Constants lend themselves to action."

"But variables are what Cassandra is all about."

"Are they?"

Birnbaum looked blank.

"What's the one thing that's constant in nearly every scenario, every regression that you've run?"

"The source of the weapon," Birnbaum replied. "Everyone always assumed that Iran or North Korea would represent the biggest threat, but they are strong states. Too strong, really. They aren't going to surrender control of the crown jewels to a bunch of wing nuts with a messiah complex. Cassandra has been remarkably consistent on that point. The real threat comes from weak states that can no longer exercise effective command and control over the nuclear infrastructure."

"That's right," Smith said. "It's hard to plan for the variable, but you can plan for the constant. The primary source of the threat. Our ally. Pakistan."

ONE YEAR
LATER

WASHINGTON, D.C.
MARCH 28

A digital clock display showing the time 00:01. The digits are white and illuminated against a dark, slightly blurred background.

It was a good thing that the Council on Foreign Relations did not, as the black-helicopter-obsessed lunatic fringe had it, secretly run the world. *If it did*, Sam Trainor thought to himself, *the world would be forty-five minutes late for everything*. He could only hope that the CFR's alleged coconspirators, the Illuminati, the Freemasons, and the Trilateral Commission, were more efficient. From long experience, however, the Council knew how to take the sting out of the seemingly inevitable delays in its programming, even in the hyperscheduled world of Washington high policy—an open bar. Uniformed caterers circulated among the great and powerful waiting for the evening's event to begin, distributing copious amounts of free expensive liquor along with sugarcane-skewered jumbo shrimp and caviar toast points. Had this been Los Angeles or New York, the catering staff would have been a mix of aspiring screenwriters and out-of-work actors. At CFR headquarters, the drinks and canapés were shepherded by bright-eyed graduates of Ivy League and almost Ivy League universities hoping to find work as program analysts in one of the hundreds of D.C. think tanks or as legislative aides on Capitol Hill. Hard-core policy wonks.

Sam took an amber tumbler of scotch from a tray offered by a fresh-scrubbed intern who no doubt saw himself as the future ambassador to Luxembourg or some such. There was a time, Sam remembered, when he had been very much like this twenty-something, full of the kind of ambition that at its best represented a sort of naive hope that you can change the world and, at its worst, too often devolved into a mere lust for power. This was official Washington. Hollywood for ugly people. The New Rome. It was a company town in which the company was the federal government. The District of Columbia was the capital city of the single greatest power ever to bestride the globe. But it could be as shallow as Tinseltown on a bad day and as catty and as gossipy as a junior high school cafeteria.

Around him, Sam could hear the buzz of the Washington establishment playing everyone's favorite party games: *Who's Up; Who's Down?* and *Who's In; Who's Out?* The guest of honor tonight at CFR's spiffy, almost new headquarters at Seventeenth and F was most definitely both Up and In. A

soft chime signaled that the lecture was finally ready to begin. Sam shuffled along with the now half-toasted crowd into the hotel-ballroom-style room that the Council used for larger meetings. The carpet was a distinguished charcoal gray. At the front of the room was a speaker's dais. Behind it, a Prussian blue background announced some fifty times in six-inch-high capital letters that this was THE COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS. Presumably, those in attendance, nearly all of whom were either members of the Council or invited guests, knew where they were. But it looked good on television.

Sam took a seat toward the rear. In truth, he was eager to hear what the speaker had to say. Richard Newton was one of the brighter stars in the Washington firmament. He was dean of the Georgetown School of Foreign Service and the author of the year's most talked-about article in *Foreign Affairs* magazine, "The Not-So-Great Game," a thoughtful and scholarly essay on big-power rivalry in Central Asia. On top of that, he was one of the cofounders of the think tank of the moment, American Century. Like Newton himself, American Century was somewhere to the political right of Vlad the Impaler. And Newton was rumored to be in line for a senior job in the next Republican administration, if there ever was another one of those.

He was also an asshole.

Newton and Sam had been classmates at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins nearly a quarter century ago. They say that people change as they grow older, but Sam had never met an asshole who had grown out of that particular condition. There was no reason to believe that Richard Newton was the exception to the rule.

Sam shifted awkwardly in the thinly padded plastic chair. He was uncomfortably aware of his belt buckle digging into his stomach. He was putting on weight. Janani would not have given him a hard time, but she no doubt would have started to "forget" the Ben & Jerry's on her weekly forays to Safeway.

It had been almost seven years, and Sam had not really moved on. Closing his eyes, he tried to picture his wife as he wanted to remember her: young and optimistic and full of life. But all he could see was his dear Janani lying in her room at Sibley Memorial Hospital with a plastic tube up her nose and an IV needle in her arm pumping the chemical poisons into her body that the doctors insisted were the only thing that could save her life. Over a few short weeks, she had grown weak and thin, wasting away as the cancer and the poison ate away at her insides, racing to see which could be the one to kill her. He allowed himself a brief moment of grief that almost, but not quite, crossed over into self-pity.

It was spring now. Time to get back on the bike and lose the winter weight. D.C. had built a fantastic network of bicycle trails and in good weather Sam liked to ride his Diamondback road bike to the point of exhaustion and forgetfulness.

It took nearly ten minutes for the guests to take their seats. Sam swished the scotch in his glass and listened to the ice cubes clink against one another agreeably.

The president of the Council, Dr. George Forrester, stepped up to the dais with the easy authority of a man used to commanding lecture halls. For all of the dignity that he sought to project, there was something about Forrester that reminded Sam of Ichabod Crane. He was tall and skinny, almost gangly, with a pronounced aquiline nose. It was rumored that Forrester had had LASIK surgery to help him with his tennis game, and the rectangular black-rimmed glasses he wore were a zero-prescription affectation that he hoped made him look like the university professor he never was. If so, his three-thousand-dollar bespoke suit somewhat spoiled that effect. Forrester was a "public intellectual," one of the Brahmins who moved in and out of government. When he was out, Forrester's home was one of more of the higher-end think tanks. The president of the Council on Foreign Relations was at the very

top of that particular pyramid.

“Council members, ladies and gentlemen,” he began. “Our guest of honor tonight needs no introduction.” Forrester paused and there was the somewhat mischievous look on his face of a man about to tell a joke that he is quite certain is hysterically funny. “But *he* needs the introduction.”

The audience laughed in self-knowing fashion. The Washington elite loved to poke fun at their own pomposity and self-importance. Ironically, Sam thought, this only made them seem somehow even more pompous and self-important. Still, Sam laughed along with the others. It was pretty funny, if only because it was largely accurate. Sitting on a comfortable leather chair next to the podium, Richard Newton smiled at the joke that was ostensibly, but not really, at his expense.

Forrester offered a brief synopsis of the featured speaker’s many accomplishments and awards. Sam couldn’t help but think about his own, much skinnier résumé. He and Newton had started from essentially the same place. Now Sam was in the back of the lecture hall and Richard Newton was listening to his praises being sung at CFR. Newton had made his career in Washington and Sam had spent most of his overseas. “Out of sight, out of mind” was an old D.C. axiom, but Sam was self-aware enough to know that there was more to that particular story.

“Dr. Newton has most recently turned his impressive intellect to the challenges of nuclear rivalry on the Indian subcontinent,” Forrester continued, after finishing up the résumé part of his introduction. “His original and penetrating analysis has helped reshape our understanding of the volatile India-Pakistan dynamic and has focused global attention on Kashmir, the single point on the planet most likely to trigger a major regional and even potentially global conflict.”

Sam leaned forward in his chair, genuinely eager to hear what Newton had to say. His interest in the subject of the lecture was deeply personal. Sam was a South Asia specialist. His graduate school research had focused on the history of peacemaking efforts in Kashmir. Richard Newton, meanwhile, had written his thesis and his first book on Soviet foreign policy. He had always been drawn to power. The end of the Soviet Union had almost been the end of his career, but Newton had found a way to reinvent himself as a foreign policy generalist, a “big thinker” as happy to pontificate on Northern Ireland as on South Africa.

On the side, he ran a lucrative international consulting business and Sam had heard from people in that position to know that the government of Pakistan was one of his confidential clients. If true, that certainly called into question his ability to express impartial judgments. Still, Newton was both extremely sharp and extremely well connected. Sam wanted to hear what he had to say about the fascinatingly complex Kashmir puzzle. He would just have to price-in a possible pro-Pakistan bias. Everyone, he reasoned, had his or her own particular blinders.

Newton had excelled at SAIS, earning his degree in a near-record four years. Sam, in contrast, had never quite finished his dissertation. In truth, Sam knew, he wasn’t really cut out for the ivory towers of academia. He liked getting his hands dirty. Eventually, he had left SAIS to join the U.S. Foreign Service, spending most of his twenty-five years in the State Department bouncing around the subcontinent, including stints in Mumbai, New Delhi, Islamabad, and Karachi. It had been a good career, if not a spectacularly successful one. If he could rewind the tape, he wouldn’t have done it differently.

Mumbai is where he had met Janani. She would be almost forty-nine now. Sam was already a few months to the wrong side of fifty. He did not like thinking about that. Somehow, he had already made it onto the AARP mailing lists. They were relentless. Hell, it was probably AARP that had found Osama bin Laden when he turned fifty and qualified for a free subscription to the magazine.

“Dr. Newton is certainly among our best and brightest,” Forrester concluded. “He is also, it probably goes without saying, a long-standing member of the Council on Foreign Relations. He’s fallen a little behind on his dues payments and has agreed to speak to you all tonight rather than wash

the dishes from the CFR dining room. Thank you for coming tonight, Richard. This should cover about six months of the arrears.”

Newton laughed as he stepped up to the dais and the microphone. He looked like the power broker he was. His silver hair was gelled firmly in place. His spring tan hinted at a recent Caribbean vacation or maybe skiing in Davos. A video-friendly striped red tie stood out in sharp relief against the background of a blue suit and crisp white shirt. He spoke without notes.

“Thank you, George. I hope you know that I’m still waiting on the check from the magazine for ‘The Not-So-Great Game.’ I think we’re square.”

The audience laughed politely. Forrester nodded and smiled.

“Friends, colleagues,” Newton said, suddenly serious. “You should, all of you should, lie awake at night worrying about the India-Pakistan relationship. North Korea and Iran get the lion’s share of the headlines, but if at some point in the next twenty years, our world is consumed by nuclear fire, rest assured that the spark for that conflagration will almost certainly have been struck in Kashmir.”

The contested state of Jammu and Kashmir was the most serious point of contention in the fraught relationship between New Delhi and Islamabad. For complex historical and political reasons, the Muslim-majority province had remained part of mostly Hindu India when the British Raj had dissolved in 1947 rather than being attached to the new Dominion of Pakistan. In the half century that followed, the province triggered at least three wars between the two giants of South Asia. That had meant one thing when the bitter rivals had been too poor to fight a truly modern war. It meant something quite different now that they were both substantial nuclear powers.

Newton offered a relatively straightforward account of the Kashmir conflict that Sam thought was somewhat vanilla and unoriginal. The audience, however, seemed to hang on every word as though the speaker were on the cusp of offering some great revelation. Maybe Sam had been expecting too much. Newton was no doubt pitching his speech to a wider audience than South Asia specialists. It may have been unavoidable that the guts of the speech felt cobbled together by graduate students or junior researchers.

“Conditions along the Line of Actual Control are tense,” Newton continued. “As tense as they have been since the 1999 Kargil War. Moreover, the political relationship between New Delhi and Islamabad is at a new low. While the Pakistani government must surely shoulder its share of the responsibility, the new Indian prime minister must be held to account for his contribution to the growing crisis. Prime Minister Rangarajan has antagonized his Pakistani counterpart and has consistently rejected Islamabad’s overtures aimed at securing a political solution.”

“That’s bullshit, Richard.”

Sam looked around, wondering who had said that, before realizing sheepishly that he was responsible. For a brief moment, he clung to the hope that he had only whispered it, but the substantial number of heads turning in his direction argued otherwise. There was a boom mike suspended from a long pole hanging directly over where he was sitting. It was there for the Q&A session that was supposed to follow the lecture, but Sam realized with a creeping sense of dread that someone had left it on. His sotto voce intervention had been caught out by every Washington politician’s nightmare—the hot mike.

Newton paused and looked out over the audience to spot the heckler. There were maybe a hundred people in the lecture hall. He quickly zeroed in on Sam.

“Sam, is that you?”

“Sorry for the interruption, Richard. I didn’t mean to say that out loud.”

“I’m quite sure you didn’t. But having done so, I’d like to hear what you have to say. Ladies and gentlemen, for those of you who don’t know my old classmate Sam Trainor, I can assure you that I am quite used to Sam’s somewhat impolitic interventions . . . at least in seminar.”

“Really, Richard, I apologize. I don’t want to interrupt the talk. I was just thinking that Rangarajan has bent over backwards to accommodate the sensibilities of the generals in Pakistan. He offered President Talwar a state visit, proposed the creation of an intelligence-sharing council aimed at minimizing the risk of overreactions stemming from misunderstanding, and even quashed a move by the opposition to authorize construction of a temple to Vishnu at Ayodhya on the ruins of the Babri Mosque. That hardly sounds like the work of a guy beating the drums of war.”

Even though he had pushed Sam to speak, Dr. Richard Newton seemed somewhat at a loss. Sam suspected that Newton’s thinking was very rarely challenged by the sycophants who surrounded him the think tanks. Newton, however, had been in Washington long enough to have absorbed its mores and rules of behavior. One tried-and-true D.C. tactic was: If you don’t like the message, attack the messenger.

“Thank you, Sam, for that pithy and insightful riposte. Pity you couldn’t have put that down on paper. Maybe you would have managed to finish that Ph.D.”

Sam’s ears burned at the gratuitous slap. Newton was so much farther up the food chain than Sam that it seemed completely uncalled-for.

“You may have something there, Dr. Newton,” he found himself saying even as half his brain willed him to shut up and take his lumps. “I never did get the degree, but I do know that the Line of Actual Control is the effective border between India and China, not between India and Pakistan. That’s the Line of Control. You’re a former Soviet guy slumming in South Asia as a paid consultant for the Pakistani government. But, for those of us who know the region, the two are as different from each other as England and New England.”

Newton turned beet red and the Washington sophisticates in the CFR lecture hall turned away from Sam. It was difficult to tell whether they were embarrassed for him or by him. Newton resumed speaking. Sam did not really resume listening. He knew that he had dug himself a hole that would take time to climb out of.

. . .

After the lecture, the ever-efficient CFR staff served coffee and cake in an adjacent room with a panoramic wall of windows that offered a less-than-inspiring view of the boxlike office buildings lining F Street. Sam helped himself to a cup of coffee from the samovar and decided to skip the cake as both a form of penance and as a symbol of his resolve to get back into shape. As he walked around the room, Sam marveled at the new superpower he seemed to have acquired after his ill-advised confrontation with Richard Newton. He seemed to project an invisible force field that kept everyone else in the room at a distance of at least six feet. One senior Pentagon civilian almost tripped over his own feet in his rush to avoid engaging Sam in conversation. He was radioactive at this point and he could only hope that the half-life of his professional ostracism would be mercifully brief. This was not his first experience with the consequences of pointing out the emperor’s state of undress.

“Making friends fast, Sam.”

“I seem to have a talent for it, Andy.”

“You know you shouldn’t do stuff like that.”

“I know.”

Andy Krittenbrink was one of Sam’s favorite colleagues—former colleagues, he reminded himself—and he was glad for the company. Krittenbrink was a young analyst in the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, which in the intel world was known by the almost accurate acronym INR. He was a specialist in the Pakistani leadership. Until a few months ago, INR had been Sam’s home institution as well. As the director of the bureau’s South Asia office, he had been Andy’s

nominal boss. It was a lofty-sounding title, but, for a Foreign Service officer, INR was something of an elephant's graveyard for diplomatic careers. That Sam's evaluations were peppered with words such as *abrasive*, *intemperate*, and the more euphemistic but no less damning *outspoken* did not help his cause.

The Foreign Service, like the military, was a rank-in-person, up-or-out system. A civil servant could burrow into a position in the federal government and, assuming even a minimum level of competence, could essentially stay in the job until mandatory retirement at age seventy. The Foreign Service was more dog-eat-dog. At every grade, an officer had a fixed number of years to earn a competitive promotion against his or her peers. Fail to make the cut and your reward was early retirement. The jump from FS-01 into the Senior Foreign Service was equivalent to the jump from colonel to brigadier general. It was also where the most drastic cuts in numbers were made. FSOs called it the "Threshold." INR was not a good springboard for making the leap, and Sam had failed to clear the Threshold on his final try. After that, it was just a matter of how long it took Human Resources to finish the retirement paperwork.

"So how is life in the real world? Are things as green as they say on the other side of the fence?" Krittenbrink's Adam's apple jumped up and down excitedly when he talked. His suit was at least two sizes too big across the shoulders. It looked like something he had borrowed from his father. Andy was the quintessential career analyst. A little schlubby, socially awkward, and sharp as a razor. As one Washington wag had once observed, you could spot the extrovert in the CIA's analytical division, the Directorate of Intelligence, because he looked at *your* shoes when he talked to you.

"Not too bad," Sam replied. "I took a job at Argus Systems in Arlington. They just got a big contract with the Agency to provide intelligence and analysis on South Asia, and I'm heading up the Indo-Pak team. It's not too different from what I was doing in INR, so the learning curve's not too steep."

"I still don't understand why you didn't get promoted into the Seniors," Andy said. "You were the best South Asia specialist in the department. It seems criminal to lose you."

Sam smiled ruefully.

"Thanks, Andy. I appreciate the support. But you said it yourself. I was a specialist. That's not a good thing to be at State. You're civil service, and they hired you to be an expert in what you do. In the Foreign Service, we're all supposed to be generalists, and there are consequences for being too specialized. I spent too much time in South Asia. My choice, and I loved every minute of it, so I can't complain."

"This wouldn't have anything to do with that time you told the assistant secretary to go to hell, would it? You were dead right."

"Maybe. But that's not the point. Look at Richard and learn something from him. You're young. You've got time. He's spread so thin that he may not know very much about the issues he speaks and writes about, but he is as smooth as eighteen-year-old scotch and he plays the Washington political game as well as any elected official. Don't underestimate that. It's a real skill. It's just not mine."

"I was sorry to see you go. You were a great boss. The guy who came in behind you couldn't find Bangladesh on a map of South Asia. Heck, I'm not sure he could find it on a map of Bangladesh."

"I was sorry to leave. But I've made my peace with it. Let me be the voice of experience. Don't fight with the new guy. Take it from me, there's no percentage in it." Privately, Sam wondered whether he really had accepted his forced retirement from diplomacy and the move to the private sector. He was ambivalent at best about taking a job at a Beltway Bandit consultancy, and he had thought hard about moving away to some small town in Montana or the Pacific Northwest and maybe finally finishing the Ph.D. He had even considered renting some fishing shack on the beach in Goa. In the end, there were personal ties that had kept him in Washington, and the job at Argus at least

allowed him to stay in the policy game. It was a good holding position. Fortunes could swing rapidly in Washington. There was no telling what the future might hold. For now, he wanted to offer his onetime subordinate the best advice he could. Andy had a promising career in front of him if he could learn to play the game better than Sam had.

“I don’t want to fight,” Andy agreed. “But the layers of bureaucracy can wear you down. I don’t really like the way the intel machinery polishes all of the sharp edges of what we write. In the end, it’s all mushy, lowest-common-denominator analysis and I think that’s a disservice to the policy makers.”

“You’re almost certainly right about that. We have a little more freedom at Argus and my team tries to take full advantage of that. It’s our job to speak truth to power, but don’t expect that they’ll love you for it. Powerful and successful people will all tell you that they don’t want to be surrounded by sycophants and yes-men and every one of them is lying.”

Andy shook his head in disbelief.

“I know you’re right. But I didn’t come to Washington because I wanted to get ahead. I came here because I wanted to do big things. I wanted to make a difference in the world. The only thing I’m making now is condo payments.”

“You will make a difference, Andy. I’m sure of it. Patience, young grasshopper.” Krittenbrink had not been born when *Kung Fu* went off the air, but Sam was confident that he was geeky enough to get the reference.

The young analyst did not disappoint.

“Thank you, Master Po.”

MATHIAS, WEST VIRGINIA
MARCH 29



You know you can't do things like that, Sam. You are your own worst enemy." Vanalika Chandra stretched languidly on the bed, the sheets still tousled and slightly damp from sex. She arched her back slightly. It was just one more thing she did that reminded Sam of a cat. He ran his finger lightly across her thigh. Her skin was the color of cinnamon.

"I know," Sam acknowledged. He'd just finished telling Vanalika about his unfortunate exchange with Richard Newton the night before. "It was not my finest hour. The worst part is that I kind of enjoyed it. Newton is living proof that you can be a stuffed shirt and an empty suit at the same time, and I liked being the one to expose that for all to see."

"You don't understand." Vanalika sat up and Sam let his gaze wander idly for a brief moment over her perfect body. "All of the people in that room feel like you made Richard Newton look. Yes, they're arrogant narcissists, but they also suffer from imposter syndrome. They wake up every morning asking themselves if today's the day. The day they get caught. Exposed as ignorant frauds who don't know enough or aren't smart enough or wise enough to be in the positions they're in. They're all insecure little children underneath. What you did to Newton you could have done to any of them. He just made the mistake of speaking carelessly in front of someone who both knows what he's talking about and has no idea what's good for him."

Vanalika reached for a pack of Marlboros on the nightstand.

"Now who doesn't know what's good for her?" Sam asked, as he lit her cigarette with the Bic lighter that had been set next to the cigarettes.

"I'm cutting back," Vanalika protested. "I only smoke after sex, and even then only after good sex. That means my husband doesn't know. He thinks I quit six months ago."

"And how is Rajiv?"

"Dull. And traveling a lot, fortunately."

Vanalika, the political counselor at the Indian Embassy in Washington, was married to a wealthy and powerful Indian businessman. It had been an arranged marriage, but whatever advantage their

families had hoped to gain from their union had been made moot by the couple's failure to have children. A blessing, Vanalika had once confessed to Sam. She and Rajiv remained married more out of habit and duty than because either of them was really invested.

It had been almost a year since she and Sam had become lovers. It was an illicit affair. Vanalika, in particular, would face both personal and professional disgrace should it become public. Sam was not much safer. He was employed by Argus Systems, but Diplomatic Security owned his clearances. Not without reason, DS considered adulterous relationships with foreign government officials an open invitation to blackmail. If the State Department knew about his relationship with Vanalika, DS would strip Sam of his clearances—and his access to classified information—in less time than it would take to soft-boil an egg. They were careful. This weekend was one of the few they had been able to steal. The cabin in the Shenandoah Valley was a three-hour drive from the Beltway. It was rented in a false name and isolated enough that there was no cell reception.

Vanalika flicked the ash from her cigarette into a glass ashtray advertising Greenwood Mountain Lodges and leaned back against the pillows.

"You seem a little down for a man who just got lucky with an incredible exotic fox. Please tell me that what Newton said didn't get to you. He was just being spiteful because you wounded his pride."

"No, it's not Newton," Sam replied. "At least not what he said. But I can't help comparing where I am with where I am. Argus was a nice soft landing spot for me after the State Department and I came to our parting of ways. But I miss it. I'm not happy with the way it ended, and I'm not thrilled about being at a Beltway Bandit. I never saw myself bellying up to the government trough as a contractor. Somehow, I always thought I'd have a little more self-respect."

"Times change, Sam. There's no shame in what you're doing. Contractors are doing more and more of the heavy lifting in your government. Mine too, but Delhi has a long way to go before it catches up with Washington."

"That's just the point. It was one thing when federal agencies were outsourcing noncore functions. I don't especially care who runs the State Department cafeteria, for example. That's not an inherently governmental responsibility. But these contracting firms are sprouting up in the D.C. area like mushrooms or Starbucks. They've gone from running the Pentagon's shuttle-bus service to making government policy. Argus works on national security. That's about as 'core' a function as I can think of."

"In which case, the American people are lucky that you're the one doing the job. I'm sure you'll be a star. Maybe I can leak you some classified information just to make sure that you get off on the right foot."

"Got anything good?"

"Well, I hear that the Indian political counselor is having a torrid affair."

"Do tell. Is it serious?"

"Very." She giggled.

"I'm still not sure I see the harm in the contracting boom," Vanalika continued. "Governments are big and slow, and private companies can often do things faster and cheaper. What does it really matter as long as the work is getting done and getting done well?"

"Look, I know a guy at the CIA who's worked on analyzing satellite imagery for twenty years. It's pretty tedious work, but it's important and highly technical. He's the guy who can tell you when the North Koreans are getting ready to launch a missile. He'd also be the first to tell you that he was glad for the steady work and government benefits, but he did the job because he was a patriot and he was helping to keep his country safe. A few weeks ago, he left the CIA and took a job at True North, a fairly typical consultancy with a contract to analyze overhead imagery for the Agency. You know budgets are tight when even Langley is looking to downsize. This guy resigned on Friday and was

back at the same office on Monday doing the same thing at twice the salary. The only difference is that now he's got a red contractor badge rather than a blue Agency badge. Oh, and one more thing. He's no longer sworn to uphold and defend the Constitution. Now he's responsible to his corporate masters and the company's shareholders. What he's doing is ultimately about profit and loss, and that feels wrong. Not as wrong as Richard Newton, mind you, but wrong."

Vanalika frowned slightly and her forehead furrowed as though she were suddenly deep in thought. She had an agile mind that allowed her to skip lightly from topic to topic, and if Sam wasn't careful, he sometimes found himself a beat or two behind in their conversations.

"Are you sure that Newton is wrong?" she asked. "About Rangarajan, I mean. I'm worried about the damage he could do to the relationship with Pakistan even inadvertently. He's young and inexperienced. Some of the decisions he's made could be seen in Islamabad as provocative. Certainly Talwar seems to see it that way. You and I have read the same intel reports. The things the Pakistanis are saying in private are alarming and unremittingly hostile. Talwar neither fears nor respects Rangarajan. We don't need both, but to have neither seems a very dangerous set of circumstances."

"Rangarajan's got to walk a fine line," Sam agreed. "But he's no babe in the woods. You don't get to the top of the Congress Party without good political instincts and an understanding of power. He knows he can't push Talwar and the clerics too hard, but neither can he afford to look like a pushover himself. That's not an easy balance to strike. I'm not saying that he's always got it right. But I think he's doing okay. And I believe he's genuinely committed to peace with Pakistan."

"God, I hope so," Vanalika said. She left her cigarette smoldering in the ashtray and laid her head on Sam's shoulder. Her hair was jet-black and thick and smelled of lavender. Vanalika was not a classic beauty. Her nose, for one thing, was just a little too prominent and a little off center, the result of a childhood horse-riding accident she had once told Sam. In repose, she was rather ordinary-looking, but she had a megawatt smile and dark eyes that sparkled with intelligence and wit. To Sam, she was beautiful and challenging, and he was grateful for the time they had together.

Vanalika sat up to retrieve her cigarette.

"I just can't image that either side really wants a war," she said, "no matter how tense things get in Kashmir."

"They don't need to want it. They just need to choose it. There are some things they'll want even less than war. When it comes to issues of pride and identity, nations and leaders can be almost unbelievably shortsighted. No one in power wants to look weak, and when leaders get caught in the kind of standoff Talwar and Rangarajan are in right now, it can be easier for them to go down the road to war than the road to peace. It sometimes seems the path of least resistance. At first. What comes later is something else. No one ever seems more surprised by war and its costs than the leaders who make that particular choice."

"Peace has its own perils," Vanalika observed. "Rangarajan has reached out to Talwar, but the clerics in Islamabad have broken every agreement they've signed so far. If Rangarajan is seen as weak, the Pakistanis will just keep pushing and taking until there's nothing left to take."

"I'm not saying you need to ask these guys to the prom. I'm just saying that Rangarajan is right to be looking for some kind of compromise. Geography is destiny, and India and Pakistan just can't escape each other."

"Not every situation is amenable to compromise. What if the European powers of the day, horrified by the violence of Shiloh and Antietam, had sent peacekeepers to America to separate the North and the South in your civil war and force a negotiated settlement? Would the world be a better place? Sometimes victory may be the best outcome to conflict even if the costs are terrible. Sometimes, maybe, it's worth any price."

"The Union and the Confederacy fought with ironclad warships and muzzle-loading rifles," Sam

replied. "India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. Once you cross the nuclear Rubicon, there's no going back. You need to find a way to live together without killing each other."

"Kind of like my marriage," Vanalika suggested.

"Exactly like your marriage," Sam agreed.

"Vanalika," he said, suddenly serious. "Why don't you leave him? Move in with me. We can stop skulking around. Maybe even go out to dinner in D.C. in a restaurant with a wine list instead of a selection of light beers in a can."

"Sam, we've been over this," Vanalika replied, with a hint of reproof in her voice. "I like what we are. I don't need more. I don't want more. Rajiv is a snake, but I know how to handle snakes. He doesn't make me happy; he doesn't make me unhappy either. You make me happy, Sam. Even so, we'd never make it as a real couple. And, in any event, you're living with someone already."

"The boxes of Indian takeout piling up in my fridge would beg to differ. Who, pray tell, is my live-in love?"

"Janani. You've been living with her ghost for seven years. A mere flesh-and-blood girl could never measure up to that kind of competition." Vanalika reached over and gently stroked his cheek. "We have a good thing here. Don't spoil it by trying to rescue me from the dark knight. I don't need rescuing."

"Do you really think my motives are so simon-pure? Maybe I'm just in it for the sex."

"You do seem to have a thing for Indian girls. Am I just the latest in a string of South Asian conquests? Another jewel in the crown?" She smiled as she said this to show that she did not mean anything unkind.

"That's right. I'm a Mughal emperor and you're my barbarian princess."

"Oh, come on. Talk to me. You know everything there is to know about Rajiv, and I know next to nothing about your past. I don't mind sharing you with Janani. I just want to know what she was like. Are you with me because I remind you of her?"

"No. She was different than you."

"Different how?" Vanalika wrapped her fingers around Sam's and pulled his hand up to her lips. She kissed his knuckles softly.

"You're a Brahmin, Vee. You grew up in comfort with power and privilege. You wear it well. It looks good on you. But you wear it easily because you've never known anything else. Janani was Dalit."

He felt Vanalika stiffen almost imperceptibly at that revelation. It was so slight that she might not even have been aware of it, but with her body pressed up against his, Sam could feel it.

"Really?" she asked.

"Really."

Vanalika shifted onto one elbow. There was a gleam in her eye as though he had just told her something shocking or salacious. Sam understood why this piece of information about his former spouse would be so titillating. The Dalit were untouchables, members of the so-called unscheduled castes whose ancestors had been tanners or butchers or laborers doing work that the Hindu religion considered unclean. The structure of the caste system was complex and multidimensional, with four major castes and literally thousands of subdivisions. But however you looked at it, the Brahmins were at the top and the Dalit were on the bottom. Caste was a rough analogue to race in the United States. Officially, discrimination on the basis of caste was against the law in modern India. There were affirmative action programs in place for low-caste Indians at universities, in government ministries, and in state-run businesses. There had even been a Dalit president of the country. Life for the lower castes had definitely improved over the last twenty years, but prejudice remained, buried just under

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