

Chapter 1 *Madras 1986*

‘He knows too much. I must ask you to do nothing.’

‘But this time I caught him in the act. I have proof, witnesses, everything. There is no possible doubt. Surely . . .’

‘I said he knows too much! The company can’t afford to have any problems. Our position is very sensitive in this country. We can’t afford to take risks. I am telling you once again – you will do nothing. And if there is any trouble, I’m afraid I shall have to hold you personally responsible. So be sensible for once in your life.’

‘I see. So you are telling me to close my eyes to corruption and behave as if nothing has happened. Is that right?’

‘I didn’t put it quite like that. But, if you insist, yes. What Vish does or doesn’t do is a minor matter compared with the company’s global strategy. Just try to get things in perspective. After all, you won’t be stuck in Madras for ever – I’ll make sure that you’re not. So just go with the flow for a bit longer. When you’re in your next post this will all seem a very long way away, I can assure you. But meantime, no trouble. I hope I’ve made myself clear. Oh, and, by the way, I advise you to forget that we have had this conversation. Goodbye.’

Dick Sterling put the phone down. His hands were trembling. He was furious with himself for failing to persuade his boss in Delhi, Keith Lennox, to support him,

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and was disgusted at the mixture of veiled threats and vague promises Lennox had made. ‘He knows too much’ – the words still rang in his ears. He wondered, not for the last time, just what it was that Vish, the office manager of the factory, knew. How could it be so important that the company’s position in India could be threatened by it? It simply didn’t make sense.

Dick glanced at his watch. Four o’clock. He called for his driver, Gopal, and asked to be driven home. He’d had enough for the day. On his way out he passed Vish in the corridor. Vish was a small, fat man who waddled slightly when he walked. His ugly smile revealed two large teeth and his small eyes reminded Dick of a snake. Was it his imagination, or was the man smiling to himself? His snake eyes glistened with self satisfaction, almost as if he knew he was safe, protected.

Dick’s car left the Trakton office and made its way slowly along the dusty, bumpy road leading south into the centre of Madras, towards his home. Even though Dick passed these buildings every day, they never lost their fascination for him. No one style dominated this city of contrasts where majestic but neglected colonial buildings stood next to modern glass and concrete banks, slum huts built from mud and roofed with coconut palms, ramshackle groups of shops selling everything from used car tyres to Indian-made foreign liquor¹ . . . And where the traffic was a chaos of vehicles competing anarchically for the few overcrowded spaces on the roads. The journey home would take a long time.

Dick sat gloomily in the back of the car, going over in his mind the events which had led up to the present crisis.

How had he got himself into this impossible situation? It should never have happened, yet somehow, looking back, it seemed inevitable. Perhaps he was beginning to believe in fate?

He had arrived three years earlier to take over as general manager of Trakton's factory in Madras. Trakton had been in India since before Independence. It had started out manufacturing military vehicles during the war and switched to commercial vehicles and earth-moving equipment when the war ended. Because of its key importance in helping to build the country's industrial base, it had not been completely taken over following Independence.

Though the Indian operation was technically independent, Trakton's corporate headquarters in London still had overall control. India was, of course, only one of the many countries in which Trakton operated. Dick had been transferred to Madras from Nigeria in fact, after a series of other overseas appointments. Each of the overseas factories had a general manager appointed from headquarters to oversee the management of the local workforce. In India this had worked particularly well. The Indian staff was highly-trained and efficient. They were also generally easy to work with; the company's enlightened industrial relations policy had made sure of that. Salaries were higher than the average, there was a good pensions scheme and generous health insurance benefits. Trakton boasted that it had not lost a day in strikes for over fifteen years.

Dick had found his senior Indian colleagues particularly good to work with. They knew their jobs inside out and

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were clearly committed to the company. Many of them had been with Trakton for the whole of their working lives, starting in the factory and working their way up to become managers. They were a good team.

The only exceptions had been Visvanathan, or 'Vish' as he was known, the office manager, and his wife Molly. Molly was in charge of the Personnel Department. For reasons Dick had only gradually understood, Vish and Molly were regarded by the rest of the senior staff as somehow 'special'. They behaved as if they had special privileges and expected other staff to defer to them. Dick slowly realised that they controlled other staff members through a combination of threats and promises. Given their positions, they could make life very difficult for anyone who opposed them. Likewise, they could make life easy for those who did what they wanted.

Dick knew that this sort of behaviour happened to varying degrees in every culture and didn't think much of it. Indeed, in the first few weeks after his arrival, both Vish and Molly had been all smiles and helpfulness.

'You'll need a driving licence. Don't worry. I know someone in the police. We'll fix it for you. There's no need for you to worry about any of these things. Just let me know and I'll take care of it,' Vish had said.

They had invited Dick and his wife Sally to dinner too. Their newly-built house was in the fashionable, up-and-coming Kalakshetra Colony,² close to the sea. Dick had been suitably impressed by the expensively-furnished house, which was full of the most modern household equipment. He had half-wondered, innocently, whether Vish had had to borrow money to pay for it all. Molly was

justifiably proud of her collection of Indian temple carvings, southern Indian bronze statues and contemporary paintings.

They had invited a selection of their 'closest friends': a High Court judge, a police inspector, an IAS³ officer, an architect, an ex-Minister of Finance in the State Government, the owner of a shipping company, a couple from the British High Commission, a Tamil⁴ film director and a well-known local painter. Dick felt slightly uneasily, that these people had been invited to prove to him how well-connected the Visvanathans were. It had been a pleasant evening nonetheless. It was only later that Dick recalled seeing two members of the office staff helping to serve the meal. He also noted that there had been no shortage of genuine Scotch whisky, a drink not easily available on the local market.

It was not long, however, before Dick began experiencing another side to the Visvanathans. One morning he had gone into Vish's office unexpectedly for an informal chat. He found his office manager stamping his feet with rage, screaming abuse at one of the junior drivers. Papers and files had been thrown on the floor. Dick asked Vish to follow him to his office. There he had suggested that perhaps less dramatic personnel management techniques should be used in future. Vish had not liked the criticism. His small snake-like eyes had almost disappeared in the fat folds of his face. He had continued to clench and unclench his hands throughout the brief interview. Sweat ran in streams down his neck. He had left the office soon after the interview and remained away on 'sick leave' for two more days.