

Chapter 1

They reached the coast at midnight. The two military trucks turned off the main highway onto a neglected gravel track which wound through rows of orange trees. From where he sat perched in the back of the second truck, Sami saw the fruit reflected in the headlights like glowing yellow eyes.

After bumping slowly around deep potholes, the trucks pulled up at a cluster of five old wooden huts around a clearing. In a huge open-sided shed, empty wooden crates were stacked untidily from floor to ceiling.

Sami still felt sick from the winding drive down the mountain. He had sat on the men's rucksacks and kept a tight grip on the three rubber dinghies beside him as the truck lurched around the tight bends. He'd had to take slow deep breaths to stop himself from throwing up.

Captain Baqar, the leader of the *Fidayeen* Commandos, jumped down from the first truck and looked around. A short, bear-like man with a temperament to match, he took every opportunity to assert his authority.

'Everyone out,' he yelled in Arabic. 'I want an armed guard watching the trucks! These bloody locals, I don't trust them.'

The commandos climbed out of the two trucks and stretched their legs after the long drive. One of the officers, a tall, lean-faced man, pointed at the shacks across the clearing. 'Move your gear into those two huts.'

Sami helped the men unload their kitbags from the back of the truck and helped carry bedrolls across to the huts. Captain Baqar stood smoking with the other two officers, speaking in urgent tones about the mission. Sami knew that their target was an oil storage depot which supplied the northern Israeli military outposts. It sounded as if the officers were afraid they might be detected as they approached the depot by sea.

After the last bag was unloaded, Sami stretched his aching back and took a deep breath. The salty air and the sound of waves washing up on the nearby beach reminded him of his parents' home in Colombo. His father used to lead Sami and his brother

across the railway tracks to the sand, where they would search for seashells among the rocks and run from the waves that chased them up the beach. Normally Sami tried not to think about his family and the fact they had no idea where he was. It just depressed him.

The captain turned to Sami. 'Don't stand around sniffing the air like a dog. Get my bags in there and make sure we have somewhere to sleep.'

Sami picked up the captain's bedroll and rucksack and ran towards the hut. It didn't pay to be around the captain when he was in a foul mood.

The hut door wouldn't open. Sami shoved it hard with his shoulder. The hinges groaned as the door opened. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light he saw old faded posters of Hollywood movies curling on the dirty scuffed walls. A layer of fine sand covered everything and crunched under Sami's feet as he crossed to open the window. The room smelled of rotten food and piss. Rubbish lay in the corners and a pile of unwashed plates was stacked on the floor against the back wall.

Sami didn't want to be there. Only that morning he had been called from his hut in the mountain camp and ordered to accompany the commandos down to the Israeli border. His job would be unloading the boats the men would use to approach their target the next night. It sounded simple but he'd heard stories from other servants of previous raids into Israel going horribly wrong.

Sami's ribs still ached where the captain had kicked him when Sami said he didn't want to go with them down to the coast.

'You worthless piece of shit, who are you to question me?' It was not the first time the captain had hit him. He yelled and threw things at all the servants in the camp.

Most of the Palestinian officers treated Sami like an animal. But it was better than that filthy Saudi gaol where they found him. Sami owed the Palestinians for getting him out of the clutches of the Afghan gang. He couldn't stop himself thinking about what had happened in gaol. It slipped into his thoughts hundreds of times a day.

The captain poked his head through the door of the hut. 'What a goddamn shithole,' he growled. 'God, I hate this country.'

Sami kept out of the captain's reach as the man stomped towards the back room. It looked like the fruit pickers had used the back room for sleeping. The room had four rows of bunk beds, each mattress rolled and tied with a cord. Sami rushed to open the two windows, letting in fresh air that smelt of the sea.

The captain looked around. 'This is better!' He flexed his head this way and that to loosen his neck muscles. He grunted and pulled one of the beds closer to a window. 'Unroll it here,' he said. 'And get rid of that filthy mattress. I don't want it anywhere near me.'

The two young officers who followed the captain into the back room looked nervous. Sami knew it was their first mission. Their eyes darted around the room, knuckles white where they clutched their weapons.

Lieutenant Shafiq nodded at Sami as they passed. Not much older than Sami, the lieutenant reminded him of his older brother. He had the same deep-set eyes that made him look serious even when he was trying to be funny.

After the officers settled in their hut, Sami sat outside on the step. The sea breeze had picked up, rustling the leaves on the fruit trees. Sami could hear the men talking inside. He knew he should get some sleep but his mind was restless. He just wanted to be back in the mountains where he felt safe.

The sentry patrolling the open area walked over. 'Hey Sami, has the captain been giving you a hard time?' He had a laugh in his voice.

Sami waved to him. 'What do you think, my friend?'

Abdul was the youngest of the *Fidayeen* fighters. He used to come to the kitchen hut in the camp and he and Sami had become friends. He would give them all cigarettes in return for Lebanese bread that he would smuggle away under his tunic.

Abdul grinned at Sami, and walked towards the orchards at the back of the hut.

The truck had backed up against a sloping ramp and Sami climbed it to retrieve his bedroll and bag. The torn, old canvas bag held everything that he owned: a clean *thawb* and a change of underwear wrapped around a toothbrush and a piece of soap. In an outer pocket a plastic card identified him as an indentured servant

of the Palestinians. Everyone needed some form of identification in this security-mad country.

The canvas bag also concealed a secret: a small but growing stash of money stuffed in the lining, notes he had collected from the men's pockets when they threw their clothes at him for washing. Sami was determined to leave this place one day and the money gave him hope that he would one day walk in the front door of his parents' house.

He found a clean place to unroll his bedding on the floor of the hut and propped open the door with a piece of wood. He stretched out but could not sleep. He tried to focus on the familiar soothing sound of the waves, but all he could think about was heading back to the mountains with the trucks after the men left on their mission.

After lying awake for what seemed like an hour, Sami crept out of the hut. He took a few deep breaths of the salty night air and looked around for Abdul. He had to be careful. Abdul might mistake him for a local.

The bright moon made huge balls of cotton of the high, rounded clouds. The faint glow from the city of Sidon to the north hid some of the more distant galaxies that he could normally see from the training camp in the mountains. Sami walked into the orchard behind the hut. He could just see the dunes through the trees. The lure of the sea was strong. The sound of the waves breaking on the beach called to him. He made his way between the orange trees, the sea breeze soft on his face.

When Sami reached the beach he lay on his back and stretched out on the warm sand and at that moment a shooting star crossed the sky right above him. People back home believed that a falling star was a bad omen, predicting death or the demise of someone close. But Sami's grandfather used to laugh and tell Sami that it was a story made up by ignorant villagers.

A slow moving cloud covered the stars as tiredness finally overtook Sami and he fell asleep, lulled by the sound of the waves.

He woke suddenly, his heart thumping. What had woken him? He remained motionless and tried to remember where he was. The breeze brushing his face and the whisper of the waves reminded him.

He dug his fingers into the sand and watched a hint of dawn lighting the sky. Soon it would be time for *Fajr*. The men would wake for their morning prayers and Sami should already be busy preparing their breakfast of flatbread and *hummus*.

He was about to sit up when he sensed movement in the dunes to his right. With his eyes open wide to the dark, he strained to hear something. Over the sound of the surf he heard a muffled cough and a quick harsh command in a language he did not understand. A hot rush of fear raced through him. Breathing hard, almost gasping for air, he tried to stay calm but thought of all the armed groups in Lebanon who would shoot first and ask questions later.

Sami pressed himself deeper into the soft sand, his senses screaming with fear. He lay very still, praying that his cream-coloured *thawb* would be difficult to see against the white sand. A whisper of movement came from the dunes. A line of about ten men crossed the sand twenty metres from Sami. They walked quietly towards the fruit pickers' huts, their feet squeaking in the soft sand. The dark shapes, each carrying a weapon, took long minutes to pass.

Sami felt a sense of doom. He had managed to get out of the Saudi prison but had he ended up in a place even more dangerous? After a few minutes he rolled over on his stomach and lifted his head, his heart hammering. The empty dunes lay in front of him, leading back towards the orchard. He scuttled like a crab, keeping low to the ground, until he reached a tree and peered into the orchard where the men had disappeared. He had to find somewhere to hide.

Then something on the other side of the beach caught his eye and he realised it was another group of men trudging up the sand towards him. Sami gathered the *thawb* above his knees and darted into the orchard. A faint glimmer of light from one of the huts told him that the commandos were already waking for their prayers.

He stopped and rested his hand against the trunk of an orange tree, his breath still jagged. A strange metallic smell made him look down. At his feet a body lay crumpled, the head twisted at an unnatural angle.

Blood stained the ground under the man's head and in a terrible moment, Sami saw that it was his friend, Abdul. *Oh no! Oh no!* His heart thumped even louder. He was cold with sweat.

Even as he tried to scramble around the body, Sami couldn't keep his eyes off the dead sentry. *This is bad*, he thought. *This is bad*.

Flashes of light and explosions came from the camp, lighting up the fruit trees with an unearthly glow. Gunfire erupted within the orchard. Sami crouched on the sandy soil, his body shaking.

Out in the open, beside the dead sentry, Sami made an easy target. He scurried deeper into the orchard but the only places to hide were low piles of pruned branches. Bursts of automatic fire still sounded from the compound. A voice called from over near the gravel track to the camp. Another voice answered not far from where Sami crouched.

The burning trucks created a fiery pool of light. Sami's eyes searched the darkness, registering a flicker of movement. A man in a dark uniform, carrying a sub-machine gun, emerged from the direction of the huts, spotted Sami right away and in a single motion lifted his weapon and fired.

Bullets whistled past Sami and thudded into the tree trunk. A shout from the man was answered from inside the orchard. Sami scrambled back the way he came, keeping the tree between him and his attacker, his flesh cold with the anticipation of being hit. A pause in the gunfire made him look over his shoulder. He could not see anything, but knew the man would be searching for him. Sami was no stranger to trouble but he had never experienced someone out to kill him. He turned to go deeper into the orchard but tripped and crashed to the ground. It was Abdul. In his haste he had not seen the body.

Abdul's assault rifle lay on the ground, his hand still curled around the stock. Sami fumbled for the weapon. It was heavier than he had imagined. He had cleaned many of them at the camp but had never handled one with a full magazine. Although Sami felt more secure with a loaded rifle in his hand, he had never fired one. But he had seen it done many times. It couldn't be that difficult.

Sami's hands tightened around the rifle stock. The only way he could see to get out of there was to go around the camp to the main highway. He wiped the sweat from his hands on his *thawb* and moved parallel to the edge of the camp. He moved slowly, crouched

almost double. Choking smoke and the sharp smell of explosives filled the air. Flashes of explosions and gunfire echoed loudly through the trees. The familiar slapping sound of an AK-47 firing made him look to the right. A few of the *Fidayeen* Commandos were fighting back. But the sporadic return fire came only from the other side of the camp.

Frightened but thinking more clearly, he reached an impassable chain link fence. He had no choice but to follow it to the far edge of the camp. He spotted a man moving around the outside of the last hut. A loud explosion rocked the building, blowing out the rear windows. The helmeted man, dressed in a dark uniform and draped with ammunition pouches, stood by a window and fired into the room. Someone screamed from inside the hut. Sami ducked behind a tree and pressed against the trunk. He prayed that the man didn't see him.

The man moved into the orchard to his right. Sami slunk away to the left, his eyes searching the area where the man had disappeared. He crept behind the hut, staying just inside the orchard and using the lower branches of the orange trees as cover. Someone shouted in Arabic from inside the camp. Flames flickered through the shattered back windows of the hut Sami had cleaned. The front of the hut was brightly lit by the burning trucks and he saw that the hut door was half open. He was almost at the corner but anyone crossing that open space would come under fire so he stayed crouched next to the hut wondering whether he should take a chance and get across to the other side.

A movement in the shadows behind Sami caught his attention. Two men stood behind a bush by the edge of the clearing and slightly ahead of him to the right. They were looking at something on the other side of the clearing.

If the men turned they would see Sami on his knees next to the tree and would not hesitate to shoot. Moving slowly, Sami steadied himself and carefully raised the rifle to his shoulder. He tried to imitate the actions of the commandos he had seen in training. Through the open sights of the weapon Sami aimed at the two men and pulled the trigger. The gun did not fire.

Sami looked down in horror, turning the gun from side to side, wondering what had happened. The safety catch was locked! Sami

cursed himself. He'd watched the commandos train so many times. How could he make such a stupid error?

He unlocked the safety just as the men started to turn. One man's eyes widened in surprise as he saw Sami crouched by the tree.

Sami threw the rifle to his shoulder and pulled the trigger. He was blinded by the flash and blinked hard to clear his eyes. When he could see again, the two men had vanished. Had he hit them? Too scared to look away in case they reappeared, Sami kept the rifle on his shoulder. Someone shouted from the orchard where the men had been.

Sami turned and scrambled around the hut. Bullets thumped against the other side of the building. He crouched below the window with his back against the wall. Although hidden from whoever had fired, he was out in the open and knew he couldn't stay there too long. He remembered one of the instructors at camp telling the trainee commandoes that only constant movement during a fire fight would prevent them from being killed.

He could not go back to the orchard, so crept instead around the front corner of the building, crouching and holding the rifle low and ready to fire. Bullets hit around him, throwing puffs of sand into the air as he turned the corner. With no place to go he jumped through the open door into the hut. He slipped on the bedroll by the door and lost his balance, crashing to the floor onto his hands and knees. He scrambled away from the entrance knowing that staying there would get him killed.

The burning trucks filled the room with light. Sami saw his canvas bag lying on the floor where he had kicked it coming through the door.

Sami had forgotten all about his bag, but suddenly remembered his ID. Anyone not carrying an ID could be thrown in gaol or worse. He crawled over and grabbed it, slinging it across his neck and shoulder.

Now, he thought, time to go. The intense firing he had heard earlier had died down, replaced by single bursts of fire. He looked around the room. Smoke poured out of the room at the back. A body lay across the doorway. It looked like Lieutenant Shafiq.

He had no time to stop. But then he remembered the young lieutenant's kindness. He was one of the few in the camp who actually

spoke to Sami without ordering him around, and once when Sami had knocked over a pail of water, he'd taken the blame. Sami's life had become very hard and that small act of kindness had saved him a beating from the captain. Sami had never forgotten it and looked for little ways to make the lieutenant's stay in the camp easier.

Sami thought of how his father would always help people in need. His father had never said to Sami that this was how he should be, but it was expected of him. His father had been very disappointed in Sami before he left Sri Lanka. Now he had a chance to do something his father would be proud of.

On his hands and knees he crawled towards the officer. Bullets slapped into the walls of the building. Debris flew around and dust rose in a swirling cloud. He reached the body on the floor. The lieutenant was on his side not moving, his face covered in blood.

As Sami crouched beside him, trying to think what to do, the officer moaned. Sami knew he had to get him out of there. The terror Sami had felt on the beach had almost disappeared. He felt a calm he had never experienced before. He seemed to know what to do. Tongues of flames flickered from the room at the back. Sami peered through the door and received a blast of heated smoke. He gasped and his eyes began to tear. Through the smoke he saw a pair of legs protruding from under a broken bunk bed. The fire had taken hold. Beams crackled as they burnt, the corrugated iron roof clanged and groaned with the heat.

Sami knew he couldn't go in there. He'd be overwhelmed by smoke. But he got down on his hands and knees and that made a difference. He grabbed the lieutenant by the collar and dragged him towards the front door, the rifle slipping off his shoulder and getting in the way. Behind him was the open door.

He finally reached the entrance to the hut, sweat pouring off him. Gasping for breath he squatted by the door and peered outside. But the smoke billowed up in waves and he couldn't see a thing, not even the trucks.

Sami knew he had to get to the safety of the trees. He turned back to the injured officer and at that moment felt a blow to his upper body that spun him around and knocked him to the ground. He felt like he had been smashed by a sledgehammer.

His left side was numb and he could feel no pain. But he knew he'd been hit. Blood ran down his arm and dripped on the floor. The bullet had ripped right through the wall of the hut and hit him on the top of the shoulder. He sat up and wiped the blood from his hand. His head felt somehow disconnected from his body.

He peered outside, keeping back from the door. The gunfire had died down. The wind had shifted and pushed the smoke from the burning trucks across the compound. It was now or never. Sami staggered to his feet and grabbed the back of the lieutenant's collar. His left side was useless, so he used his right hand to drag him through the door into the compound. The lieutenant's head bumped against Sami's hand and his heels left drag marks in the sandy soil. Sami prayed that no one would notice them. His heart pounded as they turned the corner. No one fired at them.

Sami dragged the officer past the rear of the hut and collapsed by the edge of the orange trees behind a pile of pruned branches. Bullets slapped through the trees above and torn leaves and splinters of wood rained down around them. Blood ran down his hand and dripped from his fingers.

Sami felt like he had run a marathon. He was unsure if he'd be able to go any farther. The lieutenant lay on his back, still unconscious, blood trickling from his nose and ears. Sami pulled a few branches over him, wondering whether the lieutenant would make it.

Sami peered over the pile of branches. He hoped the raiders would be hesitant to come looking for anyone in the orchard for fear they would be silhouetted against the burning trucks in the compound. He scrambled along the ground and collapsed behind a tree a few metres away. Blood had soaked the left side of his *thawb* and his hand slipped as he grasped the rifle and pointed it in the direction of the huts. He tried to stop the bleeding by wadding the *thawb* and pressing it against the wound with the rifle strap.

The gunfire in the compound had died down completely. The smell of burnt explosives drifted through the orchard. A loud whistle and a shouted command broke the quiet. Sami tried to keep alert and watch for the raiders coming back through the orchard. But he felt his eyelids droop and slowly slipped into unconsciousness.

Chapter 2

Even at dawn the air was sticky. Sweat broke out on David's face as he carried his kitbag across the tarmac. He'd taken the early morning flight to Palali from the Katunayake airbase and they'd landed just as the sun peeped above the horizon. A warm breeze blew across the airfield, bringing with it the smell of the sea.

Everything had happened so quickly, he still couldn't believe it. David had known he was in trouble when he saw the minister's bodyguard at the end of the hotel corridor. The man had stopped and stared at David in his uniform, coming out of the room where he'd left Sharmila. Of course he knew having an affair with the cultural minister's wife was a dangerous game but he hadn't thought the old man would have so much influence within the army. Exiled to Jaffna! As far as he knew Sharmila's other men weren't being punished. Maybe David was just one affair too many for her doddering old husband. It served him right for having such a young wife.

Leaving Colombo was difficult. Not least leaving Tilak to fend for himself in Welikada Prison. Publically disowned by his well-to-do family, David was the only contact Tilak had with the outside world.

David would also miss his friends and their regular rounds of parties and dances. But what irked him most was having to give up playing as a flanker for the 2nd string Army Kabaragoyas rugby team. The men he played against didn't care that he was an officer and he had to play hard to survive. Rugby had toughened him up.

A handful of military personnel stood around inside the bare terminal, waiting to be processed by two civilians seated in one corner of the room. Faded photos of local tourist spots hung on the wall and a large glass-fronted poster warned travellers against carrying flammable items onto the aircraft.

'Good morning sir. Corporal Mendis reporting.' A soldier stood at attention in front of him and saluted. David guessed the corporal was in his late thirties. His intelligent black eyes looked straight at David above a hooked nose and immaculately trimmed moustache.

David dropped the kitbag on the floor and squinted at the glare of the morning sun shining through the open door. 'Good morning Corporal . . . ?'

The corporal reached for David's kitbag. 'I have a jeep waiting, sir. I can take you anywhere you like.'

David looked back over his shoulder at the tarmac outside. 'I have a meeting with Captain Amukotuwa at Gurunagar this morning. Can you take me there after I drop off my kit?'

'Yes sir. I have been assigned to you and have the jeep all day.'

David nodded. While waiting for the corporal to get his bag, he thought again of Tilak and wondered how he'd react when he got David's message that he'd been transferred to Jaffna. Tilak had been in prison for over five years and he was only halfway through his sentence. He and David had been at officer training college in Diyatalawa in the central highlands when an island-wide Marxist uprising had destroyed dozens of police stations in the south and central areas of the country. A group of insurgents had attacked a police station in the south, killing the three policemen on duty. They had closed all roads leading to the town and made it the southern headquarters of the uprising.

The army, short of regular officers, ordered the two officer cadets to go south and clear the town of insurgents. They were given a platoon of reserve soldiers armed with World War II Lee Enfield rifles and sub machine guns. The fighting to capture the town had been fierce and luckily for the part-time soldiers, the insurgents, armed only with shotguns, retreated into the surrounding jungle.

Over two dozen insurgents and three soldiers had been killed during the fighting and seven insurgents were held in the police gaol waiting to be transported to Colombo. One was a woman identified by the locals as the leader of the insurgents operating in the area. According to them, she had personally executed one of the policemen in the centre of town. Tilak, who had received orders from Colombo to clean up the mess, took matters into his own hands and conducted his own summary execution, shooting the woman in the head.

David still winced at the image of the woman lying on the ground, blood pooling around her head. He knew her death would

come back to haunt them and he was right. The woman was the mistress of a powerful priest in the area who used his influence with the government to bring the young officer to trial. David had barely escaped being sent to prison. Only Tilak's testimony that David had tried to stop him from pulling the trigger had saved him from being found guilty. Because of this debt, David did as much as he could to help ease Tilak's time in prison.

The drive to Jaffna town took about half an hour. The road from the airport meandered through cultivated fields and plantations of mangoes, palmyra and tobacco. The only vehicles on the road seemed to be decrepit trucks, bullock carts and bicycles. A packed bus with passengers hanging out the sides clattered down the road, its engine wheezing and coughing.

A barefoot boy herding black and white goats crossed the road in front of the jeep, forcing Corporal Mendis to a stop. Seemingly oblivious to the corporal's insistent use of the horn, the boy used his long bamboo pole to guide the animals down a side street.

'Bloody locals, they think they own the place.' Corporal Mendis accelerated impatiently, swerving to avoid a goat that had stopped to sniff at something in the middle of the road.

David glanced at the corporal. A typical Sinhalese from the south of the country, he would have no sympathy for the local Tamils.

Massive flame trees lined the road, providing shade to the locals out shopping. The women wore colourful *saris* and *shalwars* and the men, white shirts and dark trousers. Temple towers covered with Hindu gods rose above the leafy trees and closer to the town centre, old Dutch houses lined the streets. Their wide verandahs were enclosed in screens of wooden lattice, some covered in blooms of white jasmine growing from the waist high brick walls next to the road.

Cyclists passed the jeep, ringing their bells at the shoppers crossing the road. Ancient cars, some crammed with passengers sitting on one another, passed with toots of their horns. David glimpsed a shapely woman duck into a doorway and thought of Sharmila, of the way she teased him with glimpses of her body as she removed her *sari*. He'd hoped to see her one last time but she wouldn't take his calls.

They passed the low ramparts of the historic Dutch Fort and the burnt out shell of the Jaffna Library, before turning into Beach Road to the Gurunagar Army camp. David would have to make his way into the colonel's good books to get a transfer back to Colombo. He fully intended to be a captain one day. It was a promise he had made to his grandfather before he died. But David would need to do something exceptional to restore his reputation and get back to Colombo. Officers in the field were too often passed over for promotion.

There were reports of trouble brewing in the north and before he had left Colombo David had re-read everything that had come into the operations room for the past six months. He concluded that maybe things were unravelling in Jaffna and hoped he could use the situation to his advantage and impress the colonel and that way get back to Colombo before the year was out.

Outside the main building an officer stood waiting. He frowned when David walked up and saluted him. 'I thought I was being replaced by Captain Fernando.'

It was the first David had heard who had been assigned to the post before him. 'It's Lieutenant Anderson, sir. I got the job and here I am.'

The captain looked annoyed and examined David closely before half-heartedly returning his salute. 'I am Amukotuwa. I want you to meet an important informer before I leave.'

David was irritated by the captain's attitude, but excited to be dealing with an informer so soon. 'Where are we meeting him?' he asked.

'We bring them here,' the captain said, indicating the building behind him. 'We target certain areas and bring in people for questioning. We pick him up along with the others during a sweep, question him here and then release him.'

David raised an eyebrow at the captain. He was surprised that they would bring important informers into the centre of town. 'How often do you do that?'

'Not often,' said Captain Amukotuwa. 'He hasn't given us much.'

David knew he would need to review the procedures. This was one way to keep in contact with an informer, but it would only work as long as it was not done too frequently.

The captain turned and motioned David to follow him. 'His name is Seelan. He's been giving us information about what's happening in Jaffna. His younger brother belonged to one of the separatist groups and his body was found dumped in a pile of garbage earlier this year. Seelan came forward after this to tell us about the group that killed his brother. They're called the Tamil Tigers.'

Captain Amukotuwa led David to the back of the building, to a room lit by a single fluorescent tube. The man sitting at the table looked up when the door opened. Short and burly, probably in his mid-thirties, he had a mop of short black hair cut like a skull cap. He was scruffily dressed in a cream bush shirt, dark grey trousers and a pair of red rubber Bata slippers.

The man looked at David with suspicion. 'Who's this?' he asked the captain in Sinhalese.

'He'll be your handler from now on,' the captain said. 'I'm being transferred to Colombo.' The man's expression didn't change. David wondered who the captain knew to get transferred back to Colombo.

The room had a small table and two chairs pushed against the back wall. There were no windows. The air smelt of stale sweat. The fluorescent light flickered and buzzed.

The captain turned to David. 'This is Seelan. He has been giving us some useful information about one of the more militant groups.'

'And when are you going to do something about them?' the man asked, clearly angry. 'Those bastards are walking around like they own the place.'

'We need more information about what they are planning,' Captain Amukotuwa answered calmly. 'We need to catch them doing it. We can't just go around arresting people without any evidence. For all we know your brother may have been killed by someone else.'

The man shook his head. 'No! I know who did it. They've been boasting about what they did to him.'

David spoke to the man in Sinhalese. 'Tell me more about these men.'

Seelan gave David a contemptuous look. 'They are led by that thug from the north. His boys are eliminating the other groups one by one.'

‘These men from the north. Where are they coming from?’ David didn’t trust Seelan, but he might have valuable information about the trouble David felt sure was brewing in the north of the island.

Seelan addressed Captain Amukotuwa, ignoring David. ‘They come from the villages, from low-caste families. Not many educated young men join these types of groups.’

David walked behind Seelan. He noticed the sweat on the back of Seelan’s neck under his dirty collar. ‘Tell me more about these men who killed your brother,’ he said.

Seelan twisted to try to see David. ‘They are from a group known as the Tigers,’ he said. ‘They are the most militant. They were one of the original groups but they are killing off the other groups one by one. That’s what happened to my brother. They shot him in the back. They are all fucking cowards, every single one of them. And piss on their leader!’ Seelan pressed his hands onto the dirty table top. ‘And you call yourself an army. You come from the south like big shots, sit in your camps and do nothing. You are all fucking cowards.’

David leaned in over Seelan’s shoulder and spoke to him in Tamil. ‘We cannot help your brother. He is dead. If you want to destroy the people who killed him then you have to calm down and help us. I am not going to work with you if you don’t cooperate.’

Seelan looked at David in surprise and glanced at Captain Amukotuwa, who was standing near the door with his arms crossed.

David spoke Tamil reasonably well. As a child, his next door neighbours were a Tamil family and David grew up playing with the two boys. Like many who could arrange it, the family ended up migrating to Canada.

David slammed his hand on the table. ‘Well, what will it be? You either calm down or we will drop you off in an army truck where we found you.’

Seelan took a deep breath, dropped his chin and put his hands on top of his head. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said in Tamil. ‘My brother was such a smart kid. He would have gone far.’ His cockiness had wilted at David’s outburst. ‘I can help you to eradicate this nest of cobras who are destroying us all. Just tell me what you want me to do.’

David lowered his voice. 'Okay. Where do these groups get their arms and training?'

Seelan still had his head down. 'The arms are shipped from India,' he said. 'Many of the men go there for training as well. I have heard that a few have been sent somewhere in the Middle East to be trained. But I don't know where.'

David turned and looked at Captain Amukotuwa. It was a vital piece of intelligence. None of the reports he had read said anything about Tamils being trained in the Middle East.

The captain shrugged his shoulders. 'I cannot speak Tamil. What did he say?'

It surprised David that the captain did not understand the local language. 'He says that some of the men joining these groups are being trained in the Middle East. Had you heard that before?'

Captain Amukotuwa shook his head.

David looked down at Seelan. 'Speak in Sinhalese so the captain can understand. Where did you get that information? Do you know where they are sent?'

Seelan shook his head. 'I don't know. That's all I have heard.'

David stared down at Seelan, trying to think this through. If there was a Middle East connection, finding out where the training was being held would become a priority. Maybe this was what he was looking for to get into the colonel's good books.

'Where do the Tigers operate from?' David asked Seelan. 'Do they have any bases in Jaffna?'

'They're all over. They'll be watching this camp right now. I shouldn't be brought here, you know.' He lifted his head and looked up at David. 'They would have watched you drive in. I have heard that they don't sleep two nights in the same place.'

David glanced at Captain Amukotuwa. 'Is it true? Is the camp being watched? Don't we send out regular patrols and sweep the area?'

The captain frowned at Seelan. 'He says this every time we bring him here but we have not seen anyone hanging around. I think he makes it up to get more attention.'

Seelan grunted contemptuously at the captain. 'You Sinhalese wouldn't know what to look for. They watch every camp in Jaffna'

and keep a record of all your movements. One day when it's too late you'll find out.'

The captain waved his hand dismissively. 'The Tamil groups are too disorganised. And anyway, they don't work together. Look at what happened to his brother. There is no way they can mount an effort like that.' He leaned against the wall next to the door and looked at David. 'If you came here looking for some big conspiracy between all these groups, you are wasting your time.'

David spent the next hour questioning Seelan who much to the captain's annoyance, kept answering in Tamil. Seelan had information about several of the groups and how they operated in the town, but could provide nothing on any action they might be planning.

David leaned on the table. 'You know what we want. Reliable information on anything these people might be cooking up. If you want your brother's killers caught, you better start delivering.'

Seelan nodded. 'I have heard that some within the group are pushing for more action.' He glanced at the captain before continuing in Tamil. 'This man is too arrogant and I couldn't work with him. I will see what I can do.'

David stood outside the room with Captain Amukotuwa and watched Seelan being taken away. He would be released the next morning along with the other men who had been rounded up. If Seelan came by any important information, he would place a yellow garment in the window of his *sari* shop. It would be the signal for him to be picked up.

'You will do well speaking their language,' the captain said. 'Sometimes I think they deliberately pretend not to understand what I say in Sinhalese just to piss me off.'

David glanced at him. 'You said he was one of your better informers, but you seem to dismiss a lot of what he said.'

The captain shrugged. 'He is the only informer we have who has come forward voluntarily. We've also developed a few contacts in the town. But the information they've been giving us is always too late. Seelan is your best chance.'

David looked at Captain Amukotuwa in surprise. 'I was told that there was a network in place, feeding us reliable information.'

You're telling me that Seelan is our only real asset. How can that be?'

The captain scoffed. 'You people in headquarters sit in your air-conditioned offices and think there is an insurgent under every mango tree. You will find out soon enough that's not true.' He glanced at his watch and started down the corridor. 'I've got to get going now. I'm on the afternoon flight to Colombo. Call me if you have any questions.'

In the jeep on the way back to the base, David watched the people on the street. He tried to imagine what it would be like living in Jaffna, surrounded by army camps, being rounded up at random and questioned. He caught the eye of a young man on a bicycle staring at the jeep as it drove past. He could easily be a member of one of the separatist groups. The truth was the authorities knew almost nothing about what was going on. The network the colonel had spoken about did not exist and David had the feeling that there was not much time to build a new one.