



THE AN INSPECTOR SAMUEL TAY NOVEL

# DEAD AMERICAN

# JAKE NEEDHAM

*"JAKE NEEDHAM IS  
MICHAEL CONNELLY  
WITH STEAMED RICE!"  
THE BANGKOK POST*

# THE DEAD AMERICAN

*An Inspector Samuel Tay Novel*

Jake Needham

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# 1

SAMUEL TAY STOOD in his tiny garden and squinted at the sky. The sun was a flickering smudge and the caramel-colored air smelled of earth and rot. Singapore, the diminutive island state known for its blue skies, dazzling sunlight, and green environment, was drowning in crap.

According to Channel News Asia, the Singapore Pollutants Index stood at a record high. Schools were closed, the armed forces had stopped training, and McDonald's was suspending delivery service. When Tay heard that last part, he knew this was really serious.

Before now, Tay had no idea Singapore even *had* a pollutants index, but for weeks now it had been the only thing anyone talked about. Every television channel was broadcasting warnings that breathing the air was hazardous to health. Were they telling him not to breathe at all, Tay wondered, or merely urging him not to breathe any more than absolutely necessary? Unless it was one or the other, he didn't see what good the information did him.

Heavy smoke from slash and burn agriculture in Indonesia had plagued Singapore for decades, but this was the dirtiest air Tay had ever seen. Blinking stung his eyes and breathing burned his throat. Yesterday he walked up to a Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf

on Orchard Road for breakfast and at least half of the people he saw on the streets were wearing white surgical masks over their mouth and nose. The city looked like it had been taken over by an antisocial cult. Maybe the surgical masks helped you breathe, maybe they didn't, but Tay thought he would rather choke than join the crowd he saw wearing them.

The bell outside his front gate rang and Tay stopped contemplating the foul air. He also stayed right where he was. A year ago, he wouldn't have hesitated to go out and open the gate. He was an inspector in the Special Investigations Section of the Criminal Investigation Department of the Singapore police. When his doorbell rang, it was always important. A year ago, he would have answered without a second thought.

But a year ago the world was a very different place. Mad men had not yet blown up half of Singapore. Tay hadn't yet caught a homicide case that appeared to have nothing to do with the bombings, until it did. And he hadn't yet shot a man and been put on administrative leave. He had been quickly exonerated and returned to duty, of course, but then eight months later he had been suspended again. CID's new commanding officer decided the first investigation of Tay's actions had been incomplete. He ordered a new investigation and a new suspension for Tay until the second investigation was concluded.

Tay had not been all that surprised. There were senior officers in the Singapore police force that had been trying for years to get rid of him. Presented with the best opportunity to force him out they might ever get, they weren't going to give up without making a fight of it. The incident should have been a simple case of a police officer defending himself and another officer. That's probably what it would have been if he had fired once. Or even twice. Ten shots made for a somewhat more difficult conversation, even if the first review panel had done their best to ease past that problem.

The bell outside the gate rang again. Tay considered the possibility it was a personal visitor who had nothing to do with

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his job, but he thought that was unlikely. Off hand, Tay could think of only one person not involved with police work who had rung his doorbell in the last few years, and that was Cindy Shaw.

Cindy was either a widow or divorced. Tay didn't know which, and he didn't want to know. She had made her interest in him so plain and pursued it so embarrassingly it had become a major preoccupation of his life to avoid her at all costs. Cindy lived two doors north of him on Emerald Hill Road and Tay had made a habit of taking a quick glance at the road outside his gate before going out just to make certain he didn't run into her by accident. Some neighborhoods had angry, snarling dogs people had to avoid whenever they left their houses. His neighborhood had Cindy Shaw. He would have preferred angry, snarling dogs.

Tay pondered the two rings of his doorbell and asked himself again whether he was going to answer it. He cocked his head and studied the dirty brown sky. Somewhere up there he found the answer written on the smog.

Tay walked over to the little teak table where he drank his coffee in the mornings, pulled out one of the chairs, and sat down. He fished a pack of Marlboro Reds out of the front pocket of his shirt. He was going to quit smoking soon. Of course he was. Everybody who smoked was going to quit smoking soon. With all the crap he was already sucking into his lungs from breathing the air in Singapore, however, he couldn't see any advantage in doing it right away.

Smoking was purely a habit for most people, but it wasn't for Tay. Ritualistic meaning pervaded every step of the process. He saw each cigarette he smoked as a few moments of personal meditation on the perfidiousness of the world.

He supposed the plain fact was he liked smoking. He liked unwrapping the pack, feeling the cellophane between his fingers, and listening to the crinkle as he rolled it between his thumb and forefinger. He loved the sudden whiff of tobacco he got when he

slit the package with his thumbnail and tore back the top. It pained him that the public nannies that gloried in telling everyone how to live had stripped the simple act of smoking of all dignity. The more difficult the smug, narrow-minded bureaucrats made it for Tay to smoke, the more determined he became to continue doing it.

Tay returned the Marlboros to his pocket and took out a small box of wooden matches. He always carried a box of real matches. Not a matchbook filled with cardboard imitations of matches, not a plastic lighter, but a box of actual matches made of real wood and tipped with honest sulfur. It didn't matter to the cigarette what he lit it with, Tay knew, but it damn well mattered to him.

He struck a match, touched it to the cigarette, and felt the first rush of nicotine do its usual excellent job of constricting his vascular system. He exhaled and watched the smoke rise into the sky, and he felt at least some of his perpetual annoyance at the world being carried away with it.

A half hour later, Tay was in the kitchen making coffee when the gate bell rang again.

"Damn it," he muttered when the sound of the bell caused him to lose track of the number of spoons he had measured into the machine's filter, "I give up." He shook his head, dropped the scoop back into the coffee jar, and went to open the door.

Tay lived in a row house with a small garden in front that was surrounded by a high brick wall. A black iron gate gave access from the garden to Emerald Hill Road, a quiet residential street that carried almost no traffic since it dead-ended less than fifty yards past his house. He stepped off his front porch, walked out to the gate, and looked through it.

A woman was standing there. She said something to Tay, but she was wearing a breathing mask and it muffled her voice so badly it was impossible for him to understand her.

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“I’m sorry,” Tay said. “I can’t hear you with that thing on your face. Who are you looking for?”

The woman put two fingers under the mask and lifted it away from her mouth.

“Inspector Samuel Tay,” she said.

“I am Samuel Tay.”

The woman hesitated. She weighed the distinction between the question she had asked and the answer Tay had given.

“Aren’t you a police detective, sir? They told me you’re an inspector with the Singapore police.”

“Who told you?”

“I’d rather not say.”

“You’d rather not say?”

The woman nodded.

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

Reaching into her purse, the woman took out a business card. She turned it sideways and pushed it toward Tay between the iron bars of the gate.

“A source of mine suggested I come and see you,” she said. “He was the one who told me where you live.”

“A source?”

The woman wiggled the business card at Tay. He accepted it with reluctance and read it with even greater reluctance.

*Emma Lazar*  
*Staff writer*  
*The Wall Street Journal*

At the bottom of the card were a street address in New York City, a telephone number, and an email address.

“Look, could I possibly come in?” the woman asked. “Talking to you through a gate feels very awkward.”

Tay wasn’t certain he cared how the woman felt, and he was even less certain he wanted to invite a masked woman into his living room. Still, she seemed harmless enough. She looked to be

in her mid-forties, slim and tall with short blonde hair cut tight to her head in a mannish look. She wore a straight black skirt and white blouse, both of which were obviously expensive, and she seemed to be attractive. With the white surgical mask covering most of her face, however, Tay was only guessing about that part.

“Are you an American?” he asked.

“Does whether I get in depend on how I answer that?”

Tay smiled in spite of himself.

“I noticed your accent,” he said.

“Then I guess I can’t fool you. Yes, I’m an American. Like it says on the card, my name is Emma Lazar, I live in New York, and I’m a writer for the Wall Street Journal.”

Tay nodded, but he didn’t say anything, and he made no move to open the gate.

“I would be grateful if you would hear me out, Inspector. I think what I have to say might even interest you.”

Tay was pretty sure the woman wasn’t an out-and-out crazy, and it wasn’t as if he was all that busy at the moment. The fact that she was an attractive, well-dressed woman made no difference to him whatsoever. Of course it didn’t.

Tay turned the bolt on the gate, pulled it open, and gestured toward his front door.

“Thank you,” the woman said.

Tay nodded and followed her up the walkway.



# 2

“I WAS MAKING coffee. Would you like some?”

“That’s kind of you, Inspector. Yes, I think I would.”

“How do you—”

“Black. No sugar. Just as it comes.”

Tay nodded and gestured toward a brown leather loveseat. “Please make yourself comfortable while I—”

“I’m sorry to turn up at your door unannounced like this. I really am. But I was afraid you would refuse to see me if I called first.”

It was the second time the woman had interrupted him and so far he had only spoken three sentences. As a rule, Tay wouldn’t have put up with that, but what the woman said caught his attention. It was, of course, exactly what he would have done. Showing up to confront a potentially reluctant witness was always more productive than trying to gain permission for a conversation in advance. But even so, what was it he was supposed to be a witness *to*?

“Let me get the coffee,” he said. “Then you can tell me what this is all about.”

In the kitchen, Tay dumped the coffee out of the filter and started over again. He counted out six measures and filled the

coffeemaker with enough water to make half a pot. While he waited for the coffee to drip, he drummed his fingers on the counter and asked himself why a writer from the Wall Street Journal wanted to talk to him. Nothing came to mind until all at once an unsettling thought occurred to him.

Could this woman be here to ask him about the shooting and his two suspensions?

He couldn't imagine why an American newspaper would have the slightest interest in any of that, but he supposed it was at least possible. After all, what else had he done recently that was even remotely interesting? If that's what this woman wanted to talk about, he had no intention of telling her anything. All he needed was for a few pithy lines uttered by him about his suspension to appear in an American newspaper and he wouldn't have a hope in hell of ever getting his job back.

Had he made a mistake by letting this woman into his living room in the first place? He supposed that didn't matter now since she was there. He certainly wasn't going to go in and fling her bodily back out into the street. Besides, what harm could there be in listening, just listening, to whatever she had to say? If she started asking questions about his suspension, he didn't have to answer them, did he?

The coffeemaker dinged. Tay poured two mugs of black coffee and carried them back into the living room.

The first thing that Tay noticed was that the woman had removed her breathing mask. The second thing he noticed was that he had been right. She was indeed attractive. Very attractive, if he was being completely honest.

She wore little makeup, and ridiculously wide cheekbones set off her green eyes, a perfectly sculptured nose with a tiny bob at its tip, and wildly sensuous lips. Tay wasn't certain he could articulate what made lips sensuous but, whatever it was, this woman's lips possessed it in abundance.

"I'm glad to get this thing off," she said, folding up the mask and sliding it into her purse. "Is the air like this in Singapore a lot?"

"Not a lot, but the last few years it's gotten worse."

"The last few years everything everywhere has gotten worse."

Tay bobbed his head at that. He, of course, thought exactly the same thing. Perhaps this conversation was going to work out all right after all.

He placed a mug of coffee on the table in front of the woman, then settled into one of the two upholstered wingbacks facing the loveseat and put his own mug on the table next to his chair. His visitor raised the mug to her lips and took a small sip. Apparently she found the coffee to her liking because then she drank some more, returned the mug to the table, and leaned back into the corner of the loveseat.

"You make good coffee, Inspector."

"I don't think anyone has ever complimented my coffee before."

"Maybe you don't have a lot of visitors to whom you serve coffee."

Tay wasn't sure what to say since she had him dead to rights there. Was it really so obvious? He cleared his throat and moved the conversation to safer ground.

"May I ask now why you're here, Mrs.—"

"Call me Emma, please, Inspector."

The practice of flinging around first names at the even slightest acquaintance was one of a long list of American characteristics Tay thought truly annoying. What possible purpose did such phony familiarity serve? Tay was much more comfortable with the dignity surnames brought to a conversation between strangers, but then he didn't want to insult the woman by refusing to use her first name either. So he just nodded, decided not to call her anything, and gestured for her to continue.

"I am here about a young American whose name is Tyler Bartlett."

Tay nodded, considerably relieved, and lifted his coffee mug to take a sip. He didn't think he had ever heard of anybody named Tyler Bartlett but, whoever he was, Tay would much rather talk about Tyler Bartlett than about his suspension from Singapore CID. Surely he could avoid getting into trouble talking to a journalist for a few minutes about someone who was a perfect stranger to him.

"The Singapore police claim Tyler committed suicide," the woman said. "But I think he was murdered and the police are covering it up."

Or maybe he couldn't.

Tay returned his mug to the table without tasting the coffee. An American who committed suicide here in Singapore? Tay felt the memory of something he had heard or read stirring in the back of his mind, but he couldn't quite bring it into focus. He seldom read the local paper. He thought of the Singapore Straits Times as one of the few bits of toxic waste Singapore didn't pay somebody to bury in Africa. Maybe they should.

"If you haven't read about it," the woman said, "you're the only person in Singapore who hasn't."

Was it something he had seen on one of those occasions he had found an abandoned copy of the Straits Times in the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, and he had nothing better to do while he drank his coffee than to flip through it? Tay tried to focus in on whatever dim recollection he had, but it continued to elude him.

"I know this might sound strange to you," he finally said, "but I don't read the papers much."

"Tyler Bartlett's body was discovered in his apartment here in Singapore a little over four months ago."

"I know I've heard that name," Tay said, "but I just can't —"

"The police say Tyler hanged himself."

And that was when Tay remembered...

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Tyler Bartlett was an American in his late twenties who worked for some kind of high-tech company in Singapore. As Tay recalled the story, the young man had left his job and was planning to return to the United States, although Tay couldn't recall whether he had quit or was fired. Either way, a few days before he was to leave Singapore, his girlfriend found him hanging from a rope in his apartment. The police quickly closed the case as an obvious suicide, but the boy's parents refused to accept that and began a campaign to get a coroner's inquest into the cause of death. They insisted their son had been murdered and the crime scene had been faked, but Tay couldn't recall whether there had ever been an inquest or not.

Emma Lazar caught the look on Tay's face.

"You just remembered, didn't you?" she said.

"Yes."

"How much do you know about the case?"

"I know nothing at all about the case. I'm on leave."

"So I understand. And that's why I'm here. I want to hire you."

"I'm sorry... what?"

"I'm writing a major piece for the Wall Street Journal on the death of Tyler Bartlett. I need an investigator who knows his way around Singapore and has good contacts in law enforcement. My source says you're the right man for the job."

"I'm not a private investigator, Mrs. Lazar, and I'm not—"

"Please, Inspector, I asked you to call me Emma. Anyway, I'm not married."

Tay considered that. He wasn't sure he should, but he did.

"Emma, then," he went on after a moment. "I'm very flattered you would ask me, but I'm not interested in a job. When I'm called back from leave, I will return to CID."

"If you're called back from leave. I know the story."

"The story?"

"I know why you're on leave. I know what happened."

"How do you know?"

“My source told me.”

“What did he tell you?”

“I didn’t say my source was a man.”

“What did he, or she, tell you?”

“That you shot someone.”

“I did.”

“And that you shot him to save the life of another police officer.”

Tay said nothing to that.

“My source also said you have a lot of enemies in the senior ranks of the police force and at the Ministry of Home Affairs. They’re using what would otherwise be an open and shut investigation to try to get rid of you.”

“Did your source also tell you that he, or she, talks too damned much?”

Emma Lazar smiled and for a moment Tay felt a frisson of pride to have raised a smile in a beautiful woman.

“Look, Emma, I’m flattered you would ask me, really I am, but—”

“I’ll need you for a week, maybe two at the most, and I can promise you’ll be well paid for your time.”

“I’m not looking for a job, Emma. Not even for a week or two.”

“I’m surprised you’re not interested in the case.”

“I don’t know anything about the case. What I’m not interested in is a job.”

“I can do this with you or without you. I’d rather do it with you, but either way I’m going to find out the truth about what happened and about why Tyler Bartlett died.”

“You sound very determined.”

“Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.”

“Not in Singapore. In Singapore, it’s usually just the other way around.”

# 3

“DO YOU STILL smoke?” the woman asked.

Tay must have looked puzzled because she pointed to the heavy crystal ashtray sitting on the table between them.

“You were a smoker once or you wouldn’t have that,” she said. “It’s beautiful.”

Tay nodded, but he didn’t say anything.

“Pipe?” she asked. “Cigars?”

Tay reached in his pocket, produced his pack of Marlboro Reds, and laid them on the table next to the ashtray.

The woman smiled. “I don’t know anyone who still smokes cigarettes.”

“I do. I figure someone has to do it.”

She laughed, and it was a nice laugh. Mellow, honeyed, and Tay thought just husky enough to trigger all sorts of fantasies in a man. If he were a man inclined to fantasies. Which, of course, he wasn’t.

“I used to smoke,” she said, “but I quit years ago.”

“I’m going to quit, too.”

“When?”

“Not today.”

The woman leaned forward and picked up Tay’s pack of Marlboros. “May I?”

“You’re going to start smoking again?”

“I can’t think of a better time.”

Tay didn’t know what to say to that, so he said nothing.

She shook a cigarette out of the pack and placed it between her lips. Tay took a box of matches out of his pocket, struck one, and lit it for her.

“Oh my, not only do you still light women’s cigarettes, you use wooden matches to do it.”

“I’m an old fashioned guy.”

“Yes, I think you probably are.”

The woman drew deeply on the cigarette and Tay watched in amazement as she tilted back her head and puffed three perfect smoke rings across his living room. She was full of surprises. Tay could imagine men fighting over her, and her just sitting and smiling as if she hadn’t even noticed.

“Can I tell you a little more about the case, Inspector?”

“You can tell me whatever you like, Emma. I just don’t see how I can help you.”

“I first learned about Tyler’s death from his parents. When the Singapore police classified Tyler’s death as a suicide, his parents tried to get the American press to support a campaign to get the Ministry of Home Affairs to order a full inquest into the cause of death. I was one of the reporters they approached, and I started looking into Tyler’s death to see if there was a story there. I’ve decided there probably is.”

“From what little I remember reading, the evidence was pretty clear. It was a suicide.”

“I’ve studied the case very carefully, Inspector. I’ve become convinced very little of the evidence the Singapore police say they have that points to suicide makes sense. I think somebody killed Tyler and tried to make it look like suicide. What’s more, I think the Singapore police know that, and they are covering it up.”

“Why would they do that?”



“I don’t know, but the orders would have had to come from very high up. That suggests to me there may be a bigger story here than the death of one young man.”

“And you want to write that story.”

“Of course I do.”

“Do you have any idea why someone might want to kill Tyler?”

“I’m certain it had something to do with his work.”

“What kind of work did Tyler do?”

“He wrote software. He used to work for a company in California that produced games for the Xbox, but then Google hired him to work on the development of the software for their driverless car.”

Tay was dimly aware of something called the Xbox. He wasn’t entirely ignorant of modern life and he did know that children these days spent inordinate amounts of time slumped in front of television sets banging away at buttons and pretending to run through elaborate landscapes and shoot zombies. But a driverless car? What in God’s name was that?

“That’s quite an expression you have on your face right now, Inspector. Have you heard about the Google driverless car project?”

Tay didn’t have a clue what the woman was talking about, but nodding seemed the polite thing to do and it had the additional advantage of not making him look completely stupid in front of a beautiful woman. So he nodded, then he changed the subject as quickly as possible.

“Why did Tyler come to Singapore?” he asked.

“A company here recruited him. They were undertaking their own driverless car project and they offered him the opportunity to be a senior software developer.”

“Did he have any connection with Singapore before—”

“None. He’d never even been here. He had lived in California all his life, but they offered him a lot of money to come to Singapore and I guess he was ready for an adventure.”

It was difficult for Tay to think of living in Singapore as an adventure. For someone to see Singapore as an adventure, Tay figured they had to be living a shockingly dull life.

“What was the name of the company that hired Tyler?” he asked.

“It’s called The Future.”

“The Future? The name of the company is The Future?”

The woman nodded.

Tay tried to imagine shaking hands with someone who had just introduced himself by saying *Hello, I’m from The Future*. He could imagine it, but not without laughing.

“What does The Future do?” Tay asked, struggling to keep a straight face. No matter how much silly wordplay on the company name he could think of, he would be embarrassed under the circumstances to start snickering.

“As I understand it, they’re building a driverless car for Singapore. That’s why they recruited Tyler from Google. I’m told Singapore is the ideal laboratory for such a project since it’s small enough to be easily mapped in the detail the technology requires. That’s one of the limitations Google has discovered in California. The United States is so big that mapping it at the necessary level of detail is an almost unimaginable undertaking.”

Tay wasn’t sure he understood, but he nodded all the same.

“How long had Tyler been in Singapore when he...” Tay trailed off, trying to think of a sympathetic way to put it. He couldn’t. “When he died,” Tay finished quickly.

“About eight months. He had quit his job just before it happened, and he told his parents he was coming back to California.”

“Do you know why he quit?”

“His mother says he said he was afraid.”

“Afraid? Afraid of something in Singapore?”

The idea sounded ridiculous to Tay. Singapore had to be one of the least scary places on earth.

“That’s what he said.”

“What was he afraid of?” Tay asked.

“His mother doesn’t know. Tyler didn’t tell her. But she got the impression it had some connection to his job. That it was the reason he quit.”

“Did she tell the police this?”

“Yes, but she said they didn’t appear to care. All they said was that she must have misunderstood Tyler.”

“I can tell you from my own personal experience, Emma, the Singapore police don’t generally ignore—”

“I don’t know what they generally do. I only know what they did this time. They made a determination of suicide, then they ignored everything that didn’t fit into that determination.”

Tay said nothing. He wished he could tell Emma that was impossible, but he couldn’t. In fact he had very little difficulty imagining how something like that could have happened.

“That’s why I need somebody who understands how things work here to help me,” Emma continued. “If we go back over the evidence, I think I can build a case that someone murdered Tyler and find out why they did it. Then the police won’t be able to ignore me.”

In Tay’s experience, there was no one the Singapore police couldn’t ignore if it was politically expedient to do so. But he didn’t see any reason to say that right then, so he said nothing at all.

“I’ll be happy to pay you whatever you ask, Inspector, within reason of course. I’ve been told you’re the best possible man to help me and now that we’ve met I’m convinced it’s true.”

“It’s very kind of you to say so, Emma, but I still don’t—”

“There’s something else, too.”

Tay waited politely for the woman to go on.

“There’s something very odd about this company Tyler was working for.”

“The Future?”

“Yes. I don’t think it’s what it appears to be.”

“You mean they’re not really working on this car thing you

told me about?”

“Yes, they are. But I’m certain there’s something else going on there, too.”

“Such as what?”

“I don’t know yet, but something about that company just doesn’t feel right to me.”

Tay wasn’t sure what to say to that, so he went back to nodding.

“And another thing. Since I’ve started looking into The Future, a lot of strange stuff has been happening.”

“Strange stuff?”

“I think my emails and telephone calls are being monitored. I may even be under surveillance. It feels like I’ve stumbled into a spy movie.”

Tay was beginning to think there was only one sensible thing for him to do here. Keep nodding his head a lot, murmur whatever platitudes might be necessary, and get this woman the hell out of his house as quickly as he could.

“I guess that all sounds a little crazy,” she added.

“A bit.”

“I don’t blame you for thinking that, but it’s still true.”

Tay didn’t know what to say. Even if he set aside the woman’s sudden confession of delusions about being caught up in a spy movie, Tay wasn’t about to get involved in a case that had been very publicly closed by the Singapore police. He had enough enemies among the senior ranks now. If he wanted to get his job back, which he most certainly did, making more enemies wasn’t going to help his cause. A police detective was what he was. It was *who* he was. If he couldn’t go back to CID, he didn’t know what would become of him.

“I’m not a private investigator, Emma. And I don’t know anything about spies.”

That wasn’t completely true, Tay thought to himself. He knew a few spies, and several more people he thought might be. The whole truth was he knew a lot more about spies than he wanted

to. Probably more than was good for him.

“I need your help, Inspector. If I’m going to write this story, I need the whole truth, and I’m convinced you’re the man to help me find it.”

Tay cleared his throat. “I appreciate your confidence in me, Emma, but —”

“Please, Inspector, don’t say no. At least promise me you’ll think about it.”

Tay wasn’t sure he wanted to promise this woman anything, but it seemed cruel to say that so he remained silent. He hoped she would tell herself that his silence was agreement and let it go at that. She didn’t.

“Will you think about it?” she asked again. “Then call me?”

What would it hurt to say he would think about it? At least then this woman might go away. Tay had a vision of her bursting into tears right there in his living room, and he didn’t know how in the world he would deal with that if it happened.

“Okay,” he said, “I’ll think about it.”

“That’s all I ask,” the woman said. “I’m at the Ritz-Carlton.”

*A really expensive hotel*, Tay thought, but of course he didn’t say that. “How long are you in Singapore for?” he asked instead.

The woman lifted her chin and stared at Tay with such single-mindedness that Tay drew back.

“As long as it takes.”

Tay nodded quickly and stood up, hoping to put an end to the conversation before it became any more awkward for him than it already was. To his immense relief, the woman stood up too, and he walked her out. When they reached Tay’s front gate he opened it, but she stopped before passing through it.

“Thank you for seeing me, Inspector.”

“You’re welcome. It was a pleasure to meet you, Emma. From now on, I will read the Wall Street Journal with much greater personal attention. When I read it at all. Which isn’t often.”

The woman laughed. “You know, you’re everything I heard you were.”

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“Heard from whom?”

The woman just smiled. Then she pulled her gauze breathing mask out of her purse and tied it around her face just like it had been when she arrived on Tay’s doorstep. She nodded once, crisply. Then she turned and walked away toward Orchard Road.

Tay noticed she didn’t look back. Whether he had been expecting her to look back or not, he didn’t know.

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