

ROBERT LUDLUM'S THE ALTMAN CODE

A Covert-One Novel

**ROBERT
LUDLUM**

Gayle Lynds



Robert Ludlum's

**THE
ALTMAN
CODE**

THE COVERT-ONE NOVELS

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Robert Ludlum's

**THE
ALTMAN CODE**

A COVERT-ONE NOVEL

SERIES CREATED BY

ROBERT LUDLUM

WRITTEN BY

GAYLE LYNDS



ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN  **NEW YORK**

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**THE
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Prologue

Friday, September 1
Shanghai, China

On the north bank of the Huangpu River, giant floodlights glared down on the docks, turning night into day. Swarms of stevedores unloaded trucks and positioned long steel containers for the cranes. Amidst the squeals and rasps of metal rubbing metal, the towering cranes lifted the containers high against the starry sky and lowered them into the holds of freighters from across the world. Hundreds streamed daily to this vital port on China's eastern coast, almost midway between the capital, Beijing, and its latest acquisition, Hong Kong.

To the south of the docks, the lights of the city and the towering Pudong New District glowed, which reflected out on the swirling brown water of the river itself, freighters, junks, tiny sampans, and long trains of unpainted wood barges jostled for position from shore to shore, like traffic on a busy Paris boulevard.

At a wharf near the eastern end of the docks, not far from where the Huangpu curved sharply north, the light was less bright. Here a single freighter was being loaded by one crane and no more than twenty stevedores. The name lettered on the freighter's transom was *The Dowager Empress*; her home port was Hong Kong. There was no sign of the ubiquitous uniformed dock guards.

Two large trucks had been backed up to her. Sweating stevedores unloaded steel barrels, rolled them across the planks, and set them upright on a cargo net. When the net was full, the crane arm swung over it, and the cable descended. On its end was a steel hook that caught the light and glinted. The stevedores latched the big net to the hook, and the crane swiftly lifted the barrels, wheeled them around, and lowered them to the freighter, where deckhands guided the cargo down into the open hold.

The truck drivers, stevedores, crane operator, and deckhands worked steadily on this distant dock, fast and silent, but not fast enough for the large man who stood to the right of the trucks. His sweeping gaze kept watch from land to river. Unusually pale-skinned for a Han Chinese, his hair was even more unusual—light red, shot with white.

He looked at his watch. His whispery voice was barely audible as he spoke to the foreman of the stevedores: "You will finish in thirty-six minutes."

It was no question. The foreman's head jerked around as if he had been attacked. He stared only a moment, dropped his gaze, and rushed away, bellowing at his men. The pace of work increased. As the foreman continued to drive them to greater speed, the man he feared remained a looming presence.

At the same time, a slender Chinese, wearing Reeboks and a black Mao jacket over a pair of Western jeans, slid behind the heavy coils of a hawser in a murky recess of the loading area.

Motionless, almost invisible in the gloom, he studied the barrels as they rolled to the cargo net and were hoisted aboard *The Dowager Empress*. He removed a small, highly sophisticated camera from inside his Mao jacket and photographed everything and everyone until the final barrel had been

lowered into the hold and the only remaining truck was about to be driven away.

Turning silently, he hid the camera inside his jacket and crab-walked away from the brilliant light until he was wrapped again in darkness. He arose and padded across the wood planks from storage to shed, seeking whatever protection he could find as he headed back toward the road that would return him to the city. A warm night wind whistled above his head, carrying the heavy scent of the muddy river. He did not notice. He was exultant because he would be returning with important information. He was also nervous. These people were not to be taken lightly.

By the time he heard footsteps, he was nearing the end of the wharf, where it met the land. Almost safe.

The large man with the unusual red-and-white hair had been quietly closing in, taking a parallel path among the various supply and work sheds. Calm and deliberate, he saw his target tense, pause, and suddenly hurry.

The man glanced quickly around. To his left was the lost part of the dock, where storage and seagulls found their haven, while on the right was a pathway kept open for trucks and other vehicles to go back and forth to the loading areas. The last truck was behind him, heading this way, toward land. Its headlights were funnels in the night. It would pass soon. As his prey darted behind a tall pile of ropes on the far left, the man pulled out his garotte and sprinted. Before the fellow could turn, the man dropped the thin cord around his neck, yanked, and tightened.

For a long minute, the victim's hands clawed at the cord as it tightened. His shoulders twisted in agony. His body thrashed. At last, his arms fell limp and his head lolled forward.

As the truck passed on the right, the wood dock shuddered. Hidden behind the mountain of rope, the killer lowered the corpse to the planks. He released the garotte and searched the dead man's clothes until he found the camera. Without hurrying, he walked back and retrieved two of the enormous cargo hooks. He knelt by the corpse, used the knife from the holster on his calf to slash open the belly, buried the points of the iron hooks inside, and sealed them there by winding rope around the man's middle. With alternating feet, he rolled him off into the dark water. The body made a quiet splash and sank. Now it would not float up.

He walked toward the last truck, which had paused as ordered, waiting, and climbed aboard. As the truck sped away toward the city, *The Dowager Empress* hauled up her gangway and let go her lines. The tug towed her out into the Huangpu, where she turned downriver for the short journey to the Yangtze and, finally, the open sea.

PART ONE

Chapter One

Tuesday, September 12

Washington, D.C.

There was a saying in Washington that lawyers ran the government, but spies ran the lawyers. The city was cobwebbed with intelligence agencies, everything from the legendary CIA and FBI and the little known NRO to alphabet groups in all branches of the military and government, even in the illustrious Departments of State and Justice. Too many, in the opinion of President Samuel Adams Castilla. Anonymity was too public. Rivalries were notoriously a problem. Sharing information that inadvertently included misinformation was a bigger problem. Then there was the dangerous sluggishness of so many government bureaucracies.

The president was worrying about this and a brewing international crisis as his black Lincoln Town Car cruised along a narrow back road on the northern bank of the Anacostia River. Its motor was a quiet hum, and its tinted windows opaque. The car rolled past tangled woods and the usual lighted marinas until it finally rattled over the rusted tracks of a rail spur, where it turned right into a busier marina that was completely fenced. The sign read:

ANACOSTIA SEAGOING YACHT CLUB
PRIVATE. MEMBERS ONLY.

The yacht club appeared identical to all the others that lined the river east of the Washington Navy Yard. It was an hour before midnight.

Only a few miles above the Anacostia's confluence with the broad Potomac, the marina moored big open-water power cruisers and long-distance sailing boats, as well as the usual weekend pleasure craft. President Castilla gazed out his window at the piers, which jutted out into the dusky water. At several points a number of salt-encrusted oceangoing yachts were just docking. Their crews still wore foul-weather gear. He saw that there were also five frame buildings of varying sizes on the grounds. The layout was exactly what had been described to him.

The Lincoln glided to a halt behind the largest of the lighted buildings, out of sight of the piers and hidden from the road by the thick woods. Four of the men riding in the Lincoln with him, all wearing dark business suits and carrying minisubmachine guns, swiftly stepped out and formed a perimeter around the car. They adjusted their night-vision goggles as they scanned the darkness. Finally, one of the four turned back toward the Lincoln and gave a sharp nod.

The fifth man, who had been sitting beside the president, also wore a dark business suit, but he carried a 9mm Sig Sauer. In response to the signal, the president handed him a key, and he hurried from the car to a barely visible side door in the building. He inserted the key into a hidden lock and swung open the door. He turned and spread his feet, weapon poised.

At that point, the car door that was closest to the building opened. The night air was cool and cris-
tainted with the stench of diesel. The president emerged into it—a tall, heavysset man wearing chin
slacks and a casual sport jacket. For such a big man, he moved swiftly as he entered the building.

The fifth guard gave a final glance around and followed with two of the four others. The remain-
pair took stations, protecting the Lincoln and the side door.

■

Nathaniel Frederick (“Fred”) Klein, the rumpled chief of Covert-One, sat behind a cluttered met-
desk in his compact office inside the marina building. This was the new Covert-One nerve center. At
the beginning, just a few years ago, Covert-One had no formal organization or bureaucracy, no re-
headquarters, and no official operatives. It had been loosely composed of professional experts in mar-
fields, all with clandestine experience, most with military backgrounds, and all essential-
unencumbered—without family, home ties, or obligations, either temporary or permanent.

But now that three major international crises had stretched the resources of the elite cadre to their
limits, the president had decided his ultrasecret agency needed more personnel and a permanent base
far from the radar screens of Pennsylvania Avenue, the Hill, or the Pentagon. The result was the
“private yacht club.”

It had the right elements for clandestine work: It was open and active twenty-four hours a day,
seven days a week, with intermittent but steady traffic from both land and water that followed a
pattern. Near the road and the rail spur but still on the grounds was a helipad that looked more like
weed-infested field. The latest electronic communications had been installed throughout the base, and
the security was nearly invisible but of cutting-edge quality. Not even a dragonfly could cross the
periphery without one of the sensors picking it up.

Alone in his office, the sounds of his small nighttime staff muted beyond his door, Klein closed his
eyes and rubbed the bridge of his longish nose. His wire-rimmed glasses rested on the desk. Tonight
he looked every one of his sixty years. Since he had accepted the job of heading Covert-One, he had
aged. His enigmatic face was riven with new creases, and his hairline had receded an inch. Another
problem was on the verge of erupting.

As his headache lessened, he sat back, opened his eyes, put his glasses back on, and resumed
puffing on his ever-present pipe. The room filled with billows of smoke that disappeared almost
soon as he produced them, sucked out by a powerful ventilating system installed specifically for that
purpose.

A file folder lay open on his desk, but he did not look at it. Instead, he smoked, tapped his foot, and
glanced at the ship’s clock on his wall every few seconds. At last, a door to his left, beneath the clock,
opened, and a man with a Sig Sauer strode across the office to the outer door, locked it, and turned
stand with his back against it.

Seconds later, the president entered. He sat in a high-backed leather chair across the desk from
Klein.

“Thanks, Barney,” he told the guard. “I’ll let you know if I need you.”

“But Mr. President—”

“You can go,” he ordered firmly. “Wait outside. This is a private conversation between two old
friends.” That was partly true. He and Fred Klein had known each other since college.

The guard slowly recrossed the office and left, each step radiating reluctance.

As the door closed, Klein blew a stream of smoke. “I would’ve come to you as usual, M-

President.”

“No.” Sam Castilla shook his head. His titanium glasses reflected the overhead light with a sharp flash. “Until you tell me exactly what we’re facing with this Chinese freighter—*The Dowager Empress*, right?—this one stays between us and those of your agents you need to work on it.”

“The leaks are that bad?”

“Worse,” the president said. “The White House has turned into a sieve. I’ve never seen anything like it. Until my people can find the source, I’ll meet you here.” His rangy face was deeply worried. “You think we have another *Yinhe*?”

Klein’s mind was instantly transported back: It was 1993, and a nasty international incident was about to erupt, with America the big loser. A Chinese cargo ship, the *Yinhe*, had sailed from China for Iran. U.S. intelligence received reports the ship was carrying chemicals that could be used to make weapons. After trying the usual diplomatic channels and failing, President Bill Clinton ordered the U.S. Navy to chase the ship, refusing to let it land anywhere, until some sort of resolution could be found.

An outraged China denied the accusations. Prominent world leaders jawboned. Allies made charges and countercharges. And media around the globe covered the standoff with banner headlines. The stalemate went on for an interminable twenty days. Finally, when China began to noisily rattle its sabers, the U.S. Navy forced the ship to stop on the high seas, and inspectors boarded the *Yinhe*. To America’s great embarrassment, they uncovered only agricultural equipment—plows, shovels, and small tractors. The intelligence had been faulty.

With a grimace, Klein recalled it all too well. The episode made America look like a thug. Its relations with China, and even its allies, were strained for years.

He puffed gloomily, fanning the smoke away from the president. “Do we have another *Yinhe*?” Klein repeated. “Maybe.”

“There’s ‘maybe’ remotely, and ‘maybe’ probably. You better tell me all of it. Chapter and verse.”

Klein tamped down the ash in his pipe. “One of our operatives is a professional Sinologist who’s been working in Shanghai the past ten years for a consortium of American firms that are trying to get a foothold there. His name’s Avery Mondragon. He’s alerted us to information he’s uncovered that the *Dowager Empress* is carrying tens of tons of thiodiglycol, used in blister weapons, and thionyl chloride, used in both blister and nerve weapons. The freighter was loaded in Shanghai, is already at sea, and is destined for Iraq. Both chemicals have legitimate agricultural uses, of course, but not such large quantities for a nation the size of Iraq.”

“How good is the information this time, Fred? One hundred percent? Ninety?”

“I haven’t seen it,” Klein said evenly, puffing a cloud of smoke and forgetting to wave it away this time. “But Mondragon says it’s documentary. He has the ship’s true invoice manifest.”

“Great God.” Castilla’s thick shoulders and heavy torso seemed to go rigid against his chair. “I don’t know whether you realize it, but China is one of the signatories of the international agreement that prohibits development, production, stockpiling, or use of chemical weapons. They won’t let themselves be revealed as breaking that treaty, because it could slow their march to acquiring a bigger and bigger slice of the global economy.”

“It’s a damned delicate situation.”

“The price of another mistake on our part could be particularly high for us, too, now that they’re close to signing our human-rights treaty.”

In exchange for financial and trade concessions from the U.S., for which the president had cajoled and arm-twisted a reluctant Congress, China had all but committed to signing a bilateral human-rights

agreement that would open its prisons and criminal courts to U.N. and U.S. inspectors, bring its criminal and civil courts closer to Western and international principles, and release longtime political prisoners. Such a treaty had been a high-priority goal for American presidents since Dick Nixon.

Sam Castilla wanted nothing to stop it. In fact, it was a long-standing dream of his, too, for personal as well as human-rights reasons. “It’s also a damned dangerous situation. We can’t allow this ship . . . what was it, *The Dowager Empress*?”

Klein nodded.

“We can’t allow *The Dowager Empress* to sail into Basra with weapons-making chemicals. That’s the bottom line. Period.” Castilla stood and paced. “If your intelligence turns out to be good, and you go after this *Dowager Empress*, how are the Chinese going to react?” He shook his head and waved away his own words. “No, that’s not the question, is it? We know how they’ll react. They’ll shake their swords, denounce, and posture. The question is what will they actually *do*?” He looked at Klein. “Especially if we’re wrong again?”

“No one can know or predict that, Mr. President. On the other hand, no nation can maintain massive armies and nuclear weapons without using them somewhere, sometime, if for no other reason than to justify the costs.”

“I disagree. If a country’s economy is good, and its people are happy, a leader can maintain an army without using it.”

“Of course, if China wants to use the incident as an excuse that they’re being threatened, they might invade Taiwan,” Fred Klein continued. “They’ve wanted to do that for decades.”

“If they feel we won’t retaliate, yes. There’s Central Asia, too, now that Russia is less of a regional threat.”

The Covert-One chief said the words neither wanted to think: “With their long-range nuclear weapons, we’re as much a target as any country.”

Castilla shook off a shudder. Klein removed his glasses and massaged his temples. They were silent.

At last, the president sighed. He had made a decision. “All right, I’ll have Admiral Brose order the navy to follow and monitor *The Dowager Empress*. We’ll label it routine at-sea surveillance with no revelation of the actual situation to anyone but Brose.”

“The Chinese will find out we’re shadowing their ship.”

“We’ll stall. The problem is, I don’t know how long we’ll be able to get away with it.” The president went to the door and stopped. When he turned, his face was long and somber, his jaw pronounced. “I need proof, Fred. I need it *now*. Get me that manifest.”

“You’ll have it, Sam.”

His big shoulders hunched with worry, President Castilla nodded, opened the door, and walked away. One of the secret service agents closed it.

Alone again, Klein frowned, contemplating his next step. As he heard the engine of the president’s car hum to life, he made a decision. He swiveled to the small table behind his chair, on which two phones sat. One was red—a single, direct, scrambled line to the president. The other was blue. It was also scrambled. He picked up the blue phone and dialed.

Wednesday, September 13

Kaohsiung, Taiwan

After a medium-rare hamburger and a bottle of Taiwanese lager at Smokey Joe’s on Chunghsiao-

Road, Jon Smith decided to take a taxi to Kaohsiung Harbor. He still had an hour before his afternoon meetings resumed at the Grand Hi-Lai Hotel, when his old friend, Mike Kerns from the Pasteur Institute in Paris, would meet him there.

Smith had been in Kaohsiung—Taiwan’s second-largest city—nearly a week, but today was the first chance he’d had to explore. That kind of intensity was what usually happened at scientific conferences, at least in his experience. Assigned to the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases—USAMRIID—he was a medical doctor and biomolecular scientist as well as an army lieutenant colonel. He had left his work on defenses against anthrax to attend this one—the Pacific Rim International Assembly on Developments in Molecular and Cell Biology.

But scientific conferences, like fish and guests, got stale after three or four days. Hatless, in civilian clothes, he strode along the waterfront, marveling at the magnificent harbor, the third-largest container port in the world, after Hong Kong and Singapore. He had visited here years ago, before a tunnel was built to the mainland and the paradisaical island became just another congested part of the container port. The day was postcard clear, so he was able to easily spot Hsiao Liuchiu Island, low on the southern horizon.

He walked another fifteen minutes through the sun-hazed day as seagulls circled overhead and the clatter of a harbor at work filled his ears. There was no sign here of the strife over Taiwan’s future, whether it would remain independent or be conquered or somehow traded off to mainland China, which still claimed it as its own.

At last, he hailed a cab to take him back to the hotel. He had hardly settled into the backseat when his cell phone vibrated inside his sport jacket. It was not his regular phone, but the special one in the hidden pocket. The phone that was scrambled.

He answered quietly, “Smith.”

Fred Klein asked, “How’s the conference, Colonel?”

“Getting dull,” he admitted.

“Then a small diversion won’t be too amiss.”

Smith smiled inwardly. He was not only a scientist, but an undercover agent. Balancing the two parts of his life was seldom easy. He was ready for a “small diversion,” but nothing too big or too engrossing. He really did want to get back to the conference. “What do we have this time, Fred?”

From his distant office on the bank of the Anacostia River, Klein described the situation.

Smith felt a chill that was both apprehension and anticipation. “What do I do?”

“Go to Liuchiu Island tonight. You should have plenty of time. Rent or bribe a boat out of Linyuan and be on the island by nine. At precisely ten, you’ll be at a small cove on the western shore. The exact location, landmarks, and local designation have been faxed to a Covert-One asset at the American Institute in Taiwan. They’ll be hand-delivered to you.”

“What happens at the cove?”

“You meet another Covert-One, Avery Mondragon. The recognition word is ‘orchid.’ He’ll deliver an envelope with *The Dowager Empress’s* actual manifest, the one that’s the basis for the bill to Iraq. After that, go directly to the airport in Kaohsiung. You’ll meet a chopper there from one of our cruisers lying offshore. Give the pilot the invoice manifest. Its final destination is the Oval Office. Understood?”

“Same recognition word?”

“Right.”

“Then what?”

Smith could hear the chief of Covert-One puffing on his pipe. “Then you can go back to your

conference.”

~~The phone went dead. Smith grinned to himself. A straightforward, uncomplicated assignment.~~

Moments later, the taxi pulled up in front of the Hi-Lai Hotel. He paid the driver and walked into the lobby, heading for the car rental desk. Once the courier had arrived from Taipei, he would drive down the coast to Linyuan and find a fishing boat to take him quietly to Liuchiu. If he could not find one, he would rent one and pilot it himself.

As he crossed the lobby, a short, brisk Chinese man jumped up from an armchair to block his way. “Ah, Dr. Smith, I have been waiting for you. I am honored to meet you personally. Your paper on the late Dr. Chambord’s theoretical work with the molecular computer was excellent. Much food for thought.”

Smith smiled in acknowledgment of both greeting and compliment. “You flatter me, Dr. Liang.”

“Not at all. I wonder whether you could possibly join me and some of my colleagues from the Shanghai Biomedical Institute for dinner tonight. We are keenly interested in the work of both USAMRIID and the CDC on emerging viral agents that threaten all of us.”

“I’d very much like that,” Smith said smoothly, giving his voice a tinge of regret, “but tonight I have another engagement. Perhaps you are free some other time?”

“With your permission, I will contact you.”

“Of course, Dr. Liang.” Jon Smith continued on to the desk, his mind already on Liuchiu Island and tonight.

Chapter Two

Washington, D.C.

Wide and physically impressive, Admiral Stevens Brose filled his chair at the foot of the long conference table in the White House underground situation room. He took off his cap and ran his hand over his gray military buzz cut, amazed—and worried—by what he saw. President Castilla, as always, occupied the chair at the head. But they were the only two in the large room, drinking their morning cups of coffee. The rows of seats at the long table around them were ominous in their emptiness.

“What chemicals, Mr. President?” Admiral Brose asked. He was also the chairman of the joint chiefs.

“Thiodiglycol—”

“Blister weapons.”

“—and thionyl chloride.”

“Blister and nerve gases. Damn painful and lethal, all of them. A wretched way to die.” The admiral’s thin mouth and big chin tightened. “How much is there?”

“Tens of tons.” President Castilla’s grim gaze was fixed on the admiral.

“Unacceptable. When—” Brose stopped abruptly, and his pale eyes narrowed. He took in all the empty chairs at the long table. “I see. We’re not going to stop *The Dowager Empress* en route and search her. You want to keep our intelligence about the situation secret.”

“For now, yes. We don’t have concrete proof, any more than we did with the *Yinhe*. We can’t afford another international incident like that, especially with our allies less ready to back us in military actions, and the Chinese close to signing our human-rights accord.”

Brose nodded. “Then what do you want me to do, sir? Besides keeping a lid on it?”

“Send one ship to keep tabs on the *Empress*. Close enough to move in, but out of sight.”

“Out of sight maybe, but they’ll know she’s there. Their radar will pick her up. If they’re carrying contraband, their captain at least should know. He’ll be keeping his crew hyperalert.”

“Can’t be helped. That’s the situation until I have absolute proof. If things turn rocky, I expect you and your people to not let them escalate into a confrontation.”

“We have someone getting confirmation?”

“I hope so.”

Brose pondered. “She loaded up the night of the first, late?”

“That’s my information.”

Brose was calculating in his mind. “If I know the Chinese and Shanghai, she didn’t sail until early on the second.” He reached for the phone at his elbow, glanced at the president. “May I, sir?”

Samuel Castilla nodded.

Brose dialed and spoke into the phone. “I don’t care how early it is, Captain. Get me what I need.” He waited, hand again running back over his short hair. “Right, Hong Kong registry. A bulk carrier

Fifteen knots. You're certain? Very well." He hung up. "At fifteen knots, that's eighteen days, give or take, to Basra with a stop in Singapore, which is the usual course. If she left around midnight on the first, she should arrive early in the morning on the nineteenth, Chinese time, at the Strait of Hormuz. Three hours earlier Persian Gulf time, and evening of the eighteenth our time. It's the thirteenth now, so in five-plus days she should reach the Hormuz Strait, which is the last place we can legally board her." His voice rose with concern. "Just five days, sir. That's our time frame to figure out this mess."

"Thanks, Stevens. I'll pass it on."

The admiral stood. "One of our frigates would be best for what you want. Enough muscle, but not overkill. Small enough that there's a chance she'll be overlooked for a time, if the radar man's asleep or lazy."

"How soon can you get one there?"

Brose picked up the phone once more. This time, his conversation was even briefer. He hung up. "Ten hours, sir."

"Do it."

Liuchiu Island, Taiwan

By the green glow of his combat watch, agent Jon Smith read the dial once more—2203—and silently swore. Mondragon was late.

Crouched low in front of the razor-sharp coral formation that edged the secluded cove, he listened but the only sound was the soft surge of the South China Sea as it washed up onto the dark sand and slid back with an audible hiss. The wind was a bare whisper. The air smelled of salt water and fish. Down the coast, boats were harbored, motionless, glowing in the moonlight. The day tourists had left on the last ferry from Penfu.

In other small coves up and down the western coast of the tiny island, a few people camped, but in this cove there was only the wash of the sea and the distant glow of Kaohsiung's lights, some twenty kilometers to the northeast.

Smith checked his watch again—2206. *Where was Mondragon?*

The fishing boat from Linyuan had landed him in Penfu harbor two hours ago. There he had hired a motorcycle and driven off on the road that encircled the island. When he found the landmark described in his directions, he hid the cycle in bushes and made his way here on foot.

Now it was already 2210, and he waited restlessly, uneasily. *Something had gone wrong.*

He was about to leave his cover to make a cautious search when he felt the coarse sand move. He heard nothing, but the skin on his neck crawled. He gripped his 9mm Beretta, tensed to turn and dip sideways to the sand and rocks, when a sharp, urgent whisper of hot breath seared his ear:

"Don't move!"

Smith froze.

"Not a finger." The low voice was inches from his ear. "Orchid."

"Mondragon?"

"It's not the ghost of Chairman Mao," the voice responded wryly. "Although he may be lurking here somewhere."

"You were followed?"

"Think so. Not sure. If I was, I shook them."

The sand moved again, and Avery Mondragon materialized, crouching beside Smith. He was short, dark-haired, and lean, like an oversized jockey. Hard-faced and hungry looking, too, with a predator's

eyes. His gaze flitted everywhere—around the shadows of the cove, at the phosphorescent surge of the sea on the beach, and out toward the grotesque shapes of coral jutting like statues from the dusky sand beyond the surf.

Mondragon said, “Let’s get this over. If I’m not in Penfu by 2330, I don’t make it back to the mainland by morning. If I don’t make it back, my cover’s blown.” He turned his gaze onto Smith. “So you’re Lieutenant Colonel Smith, are you? I’ve heard rumors. You’re supposed to be good. I hope half the rumors are true. What I’ve got for you is damn near radioactive.”

He produced a plain, business-size envelope and held it up.

“That’s the goods?” Smith asked.

Mondragon nodded and tucked it back inside his jacket. “There’s some background you need to tell Klein.”

“Let’s get on with it then.”

“Inside the envelope’s what *The Dowager Empress* is really carrying. On the other hand, the so-called official manifest—the one filed with the export board—is smoke and mirrors.”

“How do you know?”

“Because this one’s got an invoice stamped with the ‘chop’—the personal Chinese character seal of the CEO, as well as the official company seal, and it’s addressed to a company in Baghdad for payment. This manifest also indicates three copies were made. The second copy is certainly in Baghdad or Basra since it’s an invoice for the goods to be paid for. I don’t know where the third copy is.”

“How can you be sure you don’t have the copy filed with the export board?”

“Because I’ve seen it, as I said. The contraband isn’t listed on it. The CEO’s seal is missing.”

Smith frowned. “Still, that doesn’t sound as if what you’ve got there is guaranteed.”

“Nothing’s guaranteed. Anything can be faked—character seals can be counterfeited, and companies in Baghdad can be dummies. But this is an *invoice* manifest and has all the correct signs of an interoffice and intercompany document sent to the receiving company for payment. It’s enough to justify President Castilla’s ordering the *Empress* stopped on the high seas and our boys taking an intimate look, if we have to. Besides, it’s a lot more ‘probable cause’ than the rumors we had with the *Yinhe*, and if it *is* fake, it proves there’s a conspiracy inside China to stir up trouble. No one can blame us, not even Beijing, for taking precautions.”

Smith nodded. “I’m convinced. Give it to—”

“There’s something else.” Mondragon glanced around at the shadows of the tiny cove. “One of my assets in Shanghai told me a story you’d better pass on to Klein. It’s not in the paperwork, for obvious reasons. He says there’s an old man being held in a low-security prison farm near Chongqing—that’s Chiang Kaishek’s old World War Two capital, ‘Chungking’ to Americans. He claims he’s been jailed in one place or another in China since 1949, when the Communists beat Chiang and took over the country. My asset says the guy speaks Mandarin and other dialects, but he sure as hell doesn’t look Chinese. The old man insists he’s an American named David Thayer.” He paused and stared, his expression unreadable. “And, hold on to your hat . . . he claims he’s President Castilla’s real father.”

Smith stared. “You can’t be serious. Everyone knows the president’s father was Serge Castilla, and he’s dead. The press covers that family like a blanket.”

“Exactly. That’s what caught my interest.” Mondragon related more details. “My asset says he used the exact phrase, ‘President Castilla’s *real* father.’ If the guy’s a fraud, why make up a yarn so easily disproved?”

It was a good question. “How reliable is your asset?”

“He’s never steered me wrong or fed me disinformation that I’ve caught.”

“Could it be one of Beijing’s tricks? Maybe a way to make the president back off about the human rights accord?”

“The old prisoner insists Beijing doesn’t even know he’s got a son, much less that the son’s now the U.S. president.”

Smith’s mind raced as he calculated ages and years. It was numerically possible. “Exactly where this old man being—”

“Down!” Mondragon dropped flat to the sand.

Heart racing, Smith dove behind a coral outcrop as shouts in angry Chinese and a fusillade of automatic fire hammered from their right, close to the sea. Mondragon rolled behind the outcropping and came up in a crouch beside Smith, his 9mm Glock joining Smith’s Beretta, aiming into the dark of the cove, searching for the enemy.

“Well,” Mondragon said gloomily, “I guess I didn’t shake them.”

Smith wasted no time on recriminations. “Where are they? You see anything?”

“Not a damn thing.”

Smith pulled night-vision goggles from inside his windbreaker. Through them, the night turned pale green, and the murky coral formations out in the sea grew clear. So did a short, skinny man naked to the waist, hovering near one of the statuelike pillars. He was knee-deep in water, holding an old AK-47 and staring toward where Smith and Mondragon hunched.

“I’ve got one,” he said softly to Mondragon. “Move. Show a shoulder. Look like you’re coming out.”

Mondragon rose, bent. He thrust his left shoulder out as if about to make a run for it. The skinny man behind the pillar opened fire.

Smith squeezed off two careful rounds. In the green light, the man jerked upright and pitched onto his face. A dark stain spread around him as he floated facedown in the sea.

Mondragon was already back down. He fired. Someone, somewhere in the night, screamed.

“Over there!” Mondragon barked. “To the right! There’s more!”

Smith swung the Beretta right. Four green men had broken cover and dashed away from the sea toward the inland road. A fifth lay sprawled on the beach behind them. Smith fired at the lead man of this outflanking group. He saw him clutch his leg and go down, but the two behind him grabbed him by each arm and dragged him onward into cover.

“They’re flanking us!” Sweat broke on Smith’s forehead. “Move back!”

He and Mondragon leaped up and pounded across the coral sand toward the ridge that sealed the cove in the south. Another fusillade behind them said a lot more than three of their attackers were still standing. With a jolt of adrenaline, Smith felt a bullet sear through his windbreaker. He scrambled up the ridge into thick bushes and fell behind a tree.

Mondragon followed, but he was dragging his right leg. He flopped behind another tree.

A fresh fusillade ripped through leaves and small branches, spraying the air and making Smith and Mondragon choke with the dust. They kept their heads down. Mondragon pulled a knife from a holster on his back, slit his trousers, and examined his leg wound.

“How bad is it?” Smith whispered.

“Don’t think the bullet hit anything serious, but it’s going to be hard to explain back on the mainland. I’ll have to hide out ‘on vacation,’ or fake an accident.” His smile was pained. “Right now we’ve got more to worry about. That small group’s on our flank by now, probably up on the road, and the gang in the cove is going to drive us to them. We’ve got to keep moving south.”

Agreeing, Smith crawled ahead through the brush, forged hard and tough under the sea-bent trees by the constant wind and spray of the South China Sea. They made slow progress, Smith clearing a path for Mondragon. They used only their feet, knees, and elbows, as they cradled their pistols. The brush gave reluctantly, the branches tearing at their clothes and hair. Smaller twigs broke and scratched their faces, drawing blood from forearms and ears.

At last they reached the high bank above another less-sheltered angle in the island's coastline. It was far too open to the sea to be called a cove. As they crawled eagerly on toward the road, voices were carried in the windless night from there. Behind them, four silent shadows materialized ashore, which two remained ankle deep in the sea. One of the shadows, larger than the rest, motioned the others to spread out. Bathed in gentle moonlight, they broke apart and emerged as four men dressed completely in black, their heads covered by hoods.

The man who had ordered them to fan out bent over. Smith heard a whispery version of a deep, harsh voice give instructions over what was probably a handheld radio.

"Chinese," Mondragon analyzed quietly, listening. His tones were tight. He was in pain. "Can't make out all of the words, but it sounds like the Shanghai dialect of Mandarin. Which means they probably did follow me from Shanghai. He's their leader."

"You think someone tipped them?"

"Possibly. Or I could've made a mistake. Or I could've been under surveillance for days. Weeks. Months. No way to know. Whatever, they're here, and they're closing in."

Smith studied Mondragon, who seemed to be as tough as the ocean-forged brush. He was in pain, but he would not let it stop him.

"We could play the odds," Smith told him. "Head on for the road. Are you up for that? Otherwise we'll make a stand here."

"Are you crazy? They'll massacre us here."

They crawled deeper into the brush and trees, away from the sea. They had gone a slow twenty more feet, when footsteps approached from the rear, grinding through the undergrowth. Simultaneously they saw the shadows of the inland group pushing toward them and the sea. Their pursuers had guessed what they would do and were closing in from front and back.

Smith swore. "They've heard us, or found our trail. Keep moving. When the ones from the road get close, I'll rush them."

"Maybe not," Mondragon whispered back, hope in his voice. "There's a rock formation over there to the left that looks like good cover. We can hide in there until they pass. If not, we might be able to hold out until someone hears the shooting and shows up."

"It's worth a try," Smith agreed.

The rock formation rose out of the brush in the moonlight like an ancient ruin in the jungles of Cambodia or the Yucatan. Composed of odd-shaped coral groupings, it made a crude kind of fort, with cover on all sides and openings to fire through, if that was what they had to do in the end. It also contained a depression in the center, where they could sink low, nearly out of sight.

With relief, they hunkered in the basin, their weapons ready, as they listened to the sounds of the island in the silvery moonlight. Smith's scratches and small puncture wounds stung with sweat. Mondragon eased his leg around, trying to find a position that was less painful. Their tension was electric as they waited, watching, listening . . . Kaohsiung's lights glowed against the sky. Somewhere a dog barked, and another took it up. A car passed on the distant road. Out on the sea, the noise of the motor of a late-returning boat growled.

Then they heard voices, again murmuring in the Shanghai dialect. The voices came closer. Closer

Feet crackled against the tough brush. Shadows passed, broken up by the brush. Someone stopped.

Mondragon raised his Glock.

Smith grabbed his wrist to stop him. He shook his head—*don't*.

The shadow was a large man. He had removed his hood, and his face was colorless, almost bleached looking, under a shock of oddly pale red hair. His eyes reflected like mirrors as they searched the conformation for any shape or movement. Smith and Mondragon held their breaths in the depression inside the rocks.

For a long moment, the man continued his slow surveillance.

Smith felt the sweat trickling down his back and chest.

The man turned and moved away toward the road.

“*Whewwww.*” Mondragon let out a soft breath. “That was—”

The night exploded around them. Bullets slammed into coral and whined away into the trees. Rock chips showered down in a violent hail. The entire dark seemed to be firing at them, muzzle flashes coming from all sides. The large, redheaded man had seen them but had made no move until he had alerted the others.

Smith and Mondragon returned fire, searching frantically among the moonlit shadows of the brush and trees for a visible enemy. Their cover had now become a disadvantage. There were only two of them. Not enough in the darkness to beat off at least seven, possibly more. Their ammunition would soon run low.

Smith leaned close to Mondragon's ear. “We'll have to make a break for it. Head for the road. My motorcycle's not far away. It can carry both of us.”

“There's less fire coming from the front. Let's pin them down and break that way. Don't worry about me. I can do it!”

Smith nodded. He would have said the same thing. Right now, with adrenaline pumping through them like lava, either of them could run from here to the moon, if they had to.

On a count of three, they opened fire and rushed out of the rocks toward the road, running low while still moving fast, dodging brush and trees. Moments later, they were through the circle of attackers. At last the gunfire was from behind, and the road was close ahead.

Mondragon gave a grunt, stumbled, and went down, ripping through the tangled vegetation as he fell. Smith instantly grabbed his arm to help him up, but the agent did not respond. The arm was without energy, lifeless.

“Avery?”

There was no answer.

Smith fell to his haunches beside the downed agent and found hot blood on the back of his head. Instantly, he felt for a pulse in his neck. None. He inhaled, swore, and searched Mondragon's pockets for the envelope. At the same time, he heard the killers approach, trying to be quiet in the heavy undergrowth.

The envelope was missing. Frantically he checked every pocket again, taking whatever he found. He felt around Mondragon's body, but the envelope was gone. Definitely gone. And there was no more time.

Cursing inwardly, he sprinted away.

Clouds had built over the South China Sea and drifted across the moon, turning the night pitch black as he reached the road. The deep cover of darkness was a rare stroke of good luck. Relieved, but furious about Mondragon's death, he ran across and dropped into the cover of the low ditch that bordered the two-lane road.

Panting, he aimed both Mondragon's Glock and his Beretta back at the trees. And waited, thinking . . . ~~The envelope had been in an inside pocket. Mondragon had gone down at least twice that Smith had seen.~~ The envelope could have fallen out then, or perhaps when they were crawling through the brush, or even when they were running, their jackets flapping.

Frustrated and deeply worried, his grip tightened on the two weapons.

After a few minutes, a single figure emerged warily at the road's edge, looked right and left, and started across, his old AK-74 ready. Smith raised the Beretta. The motion attracted the killer's attention. He opened fire blindly. Smith dropped the Glock, aimed the Beretta, and shot twice in rapid succession.

The man slammed forward onto his face and lay still. Smith grabbed the Glock again and opened withering, sweeping fire with both weapons. Shouts and screams sounded from the far side of the road.

As they echoed in his mind, he leaped out of the ditch and tore away through the trees toward the center of the island. His feet pounded and his lungs ached. Sweat poured off him. He did not know how far he ran, or for how long, but he became aware that there were no sounds of pursuit. No trampling of brush. No running feet. No gunshots.

He crouched in the cover of a tree for a full five minutes. It seemed like five hours. His pulse pounded in his ears. Had they given up? He and poor Mondragon had killed at least three, wounded two more, and perhaps had shot others.

But little of that was important right now. If the killers had quit their pursuit, it meant only one thing—they had what they had come for. They had found the secret invoice manifest of *The Dowager Empress*.

Chapter Three

Washington, D.C.

Golden sunlight drenched the Rose Garden and made warm rectangles on the floor of the Oval Office but somehow it seemed menacing this morning, President Castilla thought as Charles Ouray, White House chief of staff, stepped inside the door.

Ouray looked as unhappy as he felt, the president decided. "Sit down, Charlie. What's up?"

"I'm not so sure you want to hear, Mr. President." He sat on the sofa.

"No luck with the leaks?"

"Zero," Ouray said, shaking his head. "Leaks of such extent and accuracy over an entire year should be traceable, but the secret service, FBI, CIA, and NSA can't find a thing. They've investigated everyone in the West Wing from the mail room to the whole senior staff, including me. The good news is they guarantee the leaks aren't coming from any of us. In fact, the entire White House roster down to cleaning crews and gardeners is clear."

The president tented his hands and scowled at his fingers. "Very well, what does that leave?"

Ouray looked wary. "Leave, sir?"

"Who's left, Charlie? Who haven't they investigated who could've had access to the information that's been leaked? The plans . . . the policy decisions. They were high-level."

"Yes, sir. But I'm not sure what you mean by who's left? No one, I can—"

"Have they investigated me, Charlie?"

Ouray laughed uneasily. "Of course not, Mr. President."

"Why not? I certainly had entree, unless there were leaks I didn't hear about."

"There weren't, sir. But suspecting you is ridiculous on the face of it."

"That's what they said about Nixon before they found the tapes."

"Sir—"

"I know, you think I'm the one harmed most. That's not true. It's the American people, but I think you get my point now."

Ouray said nothing.

"Look higher, Charlie, and look around. The cabinet. The vice president, who doesn't always agree with me. The joint chiefs, the Pentagon, influential lobbyists we sometimes talk to. *No one* is above suspicion."

Ouray leaned forward. "You really think it could be someone that high, Sam?"

"Absolutely. Whoever it is, he—or she—is killing us. Not so much the information . . . the press and even our enemies, knowing our plans before we revealed them . . . that's been simply embarrassing so far. No, the worst damage is to our confidence in each other and to the potential threat to national security. Right now, I can't rely on any of our people with something really sensitive, not even you."

Ouray nodded. "I know, Sam. But you can trust me now." He smiled, but it was not a humorous smile. "I've been cleared. Unless you can't trust the FBI, CIA, NSA, or secret service."

"See? In the back of our minds we're beginning to doubt even them."

"I guess we are. What about the Pentagon? A lot of the leaks involve military decisions."

"Policy decisions, not military. Long-range strategy."

Ouray shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe we've got a foreign mole somewhere, so deep the security people can't find him. Maybe we tell them to dig deeper? Look for a professional spy hidden behind one of us?"

"All right, tell them to pursue that angle. But I don't think it's a spy, foreign or domestic. This deep throat isn't interested in stealing secrets—he's interested in changing the public debate. Influencing our decisions. Someone who secures an advantage, if our policy changes."

"Yeah," Ouray agreed uneasily.

The president returned to the papers on his desk. "Find the leaker, Charlie. I need answers before this situation paralyzes me."

Thursday, September 14

Kaohsiung, Taiwan

The windows of Jon Smith's room on the twentieth floor of the Grand Hi-Lai Hotel displayed a breathtaking panorama of Kaohsiung's sparkling night, from the horizon-to-horizon lights up to the black, star-studded sky. Tonight, Smith had no interest in it.

Safely back in his room, for the third time he read through everything in Mondragon's wallet and notebook. He had hoped there would be some clue to how the murdered Covert-One agent had secured the manifest. The only unexplained item was a crumpled cocktail-sized napkin from a Starbucks coffee shop with a name scrawled on it in ink—Zhao Yanji.

His cell phone buzzed. It was Fred Klein returning his call.

Klein's greeting was a question: "You delivered the article to the airport?"

"No," Smith told him. "I have bad news. Mondragon was killed." The silence at the other end was like a sigh.

"I'm sorry. I worked with him a long time. He was a fine agent, and I'll miss him. I'll contact his parents. They'll be shocked. Distraught."

Smith breathed deeply. Once. Twice. "Sorry, Fred. This must be hard on you."

"Tell me what happened, Jon."

Smith told him about the envelope, the attack, and Mondragon's death. "The killers were Chinese from Shanghai. The invoice manifest must've been the real thing. I have a lead, but it's remote." He told Klein about the Starbucks napkin.

"You're sure the napkin's from Shanghai?"

"Was Mondragon anywhere *but* Shanghai in the last few months?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Then it's a possibility, and it's all I have anyway."

"Can you get to Shanghai?"

"I think so. There's a scientist at the conference here, Dr. Liang, whom I think I can convince to take me to his facility there for a tour." He explained about the Chinese microbiologist buttonholing him. "There are three problems. I don't know a damn word of Chinese, and I don't have a clue where the Starbucks coffee shops are there. Then there's my Beretta. I have no way to slip it into China."

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