

Inspector Singh Investigates: A Bali Conspiracy Most Foul

Shamini Flint

Published by Piatkus Books

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

One

Inspector Singh could hear the heavy groans of frogs and the harsh chirping of crickets. The sounds of Bali were so different from the din of construction sites and car engines that he was used to in Singapore. The policeman scratched his salt-and-pepper beard thoughtfully. The night-time cacophony did have a certain familiarity. He realised that the racket reminded him of his wife's cross tones on those regular occasions when he arrived late for a family dinner or had a few beers too many at the Chinese coffee shop around the corner from his home.

Singh took a deep breath. He smelt the spicy warm scent of *ikan bakar*, fish wrapped in banana leaf, on the hotel barbecue. His nostril hairs quivered appreciatively. Wherever he was, the smell of cooking food was always enticing. Singh grimaced – even by his own standards it seemed callous to be longing for dinner at such a time. His ample stomach immediately protested his conclusion, rumbling like a distant storm. The policeman shrugged and ordered a cold Bintang beer and a *nasi goreng*. After all, one

had to eat. He wouldn't be helping anyone by eschewing food. Not, he thought ruefully, that he was helping anyone anyway.

Singh watched the luminescent white foaming tops lapping the distant shore. The beach was deserted and so was the beachfront dining room. Those few tourists who remained had ordered room service, he guessed. No one wanted to gather together in groups, not even to eat. The Bali bombings had turned gregarious visitors into reclusive loners, glancing sidelong at strangers in suspicion and fear.

His *nasi goreng* arrived, a neat hemisphere of fried rice topped with a fried egg, its soft yellow yolk trickling down the sides like lava from a newly awakened volcano. A chicken drumstick, six sticks of *satay*, *achar* or pickled vegetables and a couple of cucumber slices, were neatly arranged around the circumference of the plate. He ate every last bit with gusto, including the small bowl of sliced green *chilli padi* floating in light soya sauce.

Singh tried to avoid thinking of the oily food coalescing around his arteries. His doctor had been hinting of dire consequences if he did not improve his diet and fitness. The policeman had listened with half an ear, nodded to show that he was taking the advice seriously, pointed out that his trademark white sneakers showed he was ready for exercise and then stopped at Komala Villas, his favourite restaurant on Serangoon Road, the main drag of Singapore's Little India, for a cup of hot sweet tea and some *ladoo*, a sugar-filled Indian snack. Talking about exercise was hungry work.

Remembering the *ladoo* made him yearn for dessert. He beckoned a waiter, requested a menu and scanned it carefully. He sighed. The problem with these fancy Bali hotels was that their menus catered entirely for Western tourists. Instead of having a genuine selection of tasty meals and

desserts, there was standard European fare like spaghetti Bolognese and fish and chips. The Asian food was a tepid imitation of the original – to give tourists a flavour of the East without sending them running for the toilets.

The dessert menu didn't have Asian options either. It was either a slice of chocolate cake or crème brûlée.

Singh ordered another beer.

There was not much light in the outdoor dining area. He moved the floating candle closer. The white frangipani flower perched decoratively on the rim fell into the flame and curled and blackened, its rich fragrance giving way to the rancid smell of burning organic matter.

His contemplation of the fragility of nature was rudely interrupted.

'There you are! I've been looking all over for you. I might have guessed you'd be in the restaurant.'

A mousy-haired woman wearing khaki trousers and a men's shirt lumbered towards him.

Inspector Singh gulped some beer, feeling the gas bubbles tickle his throat. A layer of foam enhanced his moustache.

She said, 'Every time I see you, you're clutching a Bintang like a favourite teddy bear.'

Singh wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His pink full lower lip pouted slightly, the only outward sign of his discomfiture. This woman was as tiresome as a roomful of his Sikh relatives – whining about his bad habits to each other and to him. But Bronwyn Taylor was a member of the Australian Federal Police. AFP members had been sent down to Bali to assist with security and counter-terrorism measures after the Bali bombings. Inspector Singh of the Singapore police force had been despatched to Bali with the same task. Falling out with the Australians would not endear him to his bosses. He knew very well that looking for an

excuse to turf him out of the police force occupied many of the leisure hours of his superiors. He didn't intend to make it easy for them.

Bronwyn, part of the AFP's public liaison team, collapsed onto the seat across from him. 'So, what's the plan for tomorrow? How do we keep the world safe for democracy?'

Singh had already deduced that the Australian's flippant manner disguised a preternaturally sensitive nature. He ignored her question and asked, 'Have there been any developments in the investigation?'

She nodded. 'A small breakthrough. They've identified bomb residue on an abandoned motorbike – it was used by someone involved in the attack.'

'What are they going to do next? Trace the owner?'

She nodded, unruly strands of hair falling over her forehead. She pushed them away with an impatient hand.

Singh noticed that Bronwyn's features were all gathered together in the middle of her face leaving swathes of flesh around the perimeter. Small gold earrings were lost on her large ear lobes.

She continued, 'The motorbike must have been stolen. The bombers can't have been as thick as to buy one here in Bali.'

'Never,' retorted Singh, pleased to have the last word for once, 'underestimate the shortcomings of the criminal mind.'

'Has there been any sign of him?'

Sarah Crouch shook her head. Her fine blonde hair, usually gleaming under the Bali sun, had lost its lustre. She sat on a polished teak folding chair, perched on the edge like a nervous schoolgirl. Her pale hands shredded a white paper serviette into tiny pieces.

The two couples, her companions around the table, stared at her with varying degrees of sympathy and concern.

One of the women, Karri Yardley, said, 'I can't believe he's disappeared like that. Do you think ... you know, there might be another woman? That's the usual reason, isn't it?'

Her husband glared at her. Karri was sunburnt. Her hair was a deep black this week. A fake tattoo of a bird of paradise adorned one wiry brown arm. Tim Yardley said gruffly, closing his hand over Sarah's, 'There's no reason to suspect that.'

Karri was in an argumentative mood. She said, oblivious to the angry looks from the others, 'Sarah's been saying that things haven't been going well. Richard wasn't communicative. He was going out on his own a lot. Sounds like an affair to me.'

'You would know, I suppose,' sneered her husband, smoothing the sparse hair over his scalp carefully with one hand, the other still clutching Sarah's limp fingers in a tight grip.

Sarah drew her hand away. She didn't want to get involved in one of the never-ending spats between the Australian couple. She noticed that Tim was trying to catch her eye but she looked away.

Julian Greenwood asked, his voice low and consoling, 'Are you *certain* he wasn't at the Sari Club?'

Karri barked with sudden loud laughter and then put a hand with red-painted talons over her mouth. 'Sorry,' she said. 'I know it's no laughing matter – but the idea of Richard at a nightclub ...'

Julian glared at her. He said, 'He might have been in the area ... passing by or something like that!'

Sarah remained silent. The others turned to her, except for Emily, Julian's wife. She was absorbed in her glass of

wine, sipping it with small nervous jerks, staring into the ruby liquid as if it were a magic mirror.

'I've been down to have a look in the morgue, of course.' Sarah shuddered. 'It was awful. Bodies everywhere. The stench. I couldn't find him. I told them that Richard was missing ... gave them a photo. They asked for his dental records from the UK. I haven't heard anything since.'

Julian's accent reverted to its native Cockney from the carefully modulated tones he normally adopted. 'They've released most of the bodies for burial ... maybe you don't have to worry about that scenario any more.'

Emily Greenwood glanced up at this, her face beaming and her grey eyes slightly glazed as she struggled to focus. 'I passed a funeral on the way here this morning. It was really charming. Lots of fruit and flowers and everyone dressed so well.'

Julian said roughly, 'You're drunk!'

Emily giggled. 'Maybe a bit tipsy, love.'

Tim stood up, the table shaking as his belly knocked against it in his haste to get to his feet. He said rapidly, 'Bloody hell, Emily. Don't you think you could show Sarah some respect by staying sober just for once? After all, she's lost her husband.'

'Lucky thing,' whispered Emily, winking at her own husband and leaning forward so that her full bosom rested against his arm.

Sarah noted absent-mindedly that Julian's jaw was clenched tight and his knuckles showed white around his beer glass. He would shatter it if he was not careful. But he did not move his arm away. She would have felt sorry for him if he wasn't such a pathetic creature with his drooping moustache, bony nose and almost lipless mouth.

Karri intervened, staring intently at Sarah. She asked, 'What are you going to do now?'

Sarah closed her eyes, lines of weariness fanning out from the corners. She said, 'Keep looking, I guess. I don't know what else to do ...'

His wife was taller than him. She walked away from the restaurant with a loose-limbed, masculine stride. Tim Yardley hurried to keep up, panting from the effort, his thighs chafing against each other in their baggy linen shorts. He wiped his forehead with his sleeve and glared at his wife. He was furious at her, dismayed by her casual cruelty, although he had been on the receiving end of it for so many years.

'How could you laugh at a moment like that?' he demanded angrily.

Karri stopped in front of a shop window to peruse her reflection and rearrange her hair. She tossed the black locks like a salad with her long thin fingers. 'It *was* a bit of a hoot – the idea of Richard Crouch dancing the night away at the Sari Club.'

'That's not my point and you know it. It's Sarah I'm worried about – and you should be too. She's our *friend*.'

His wife adjusted a few strands carefully on her forehead and glanced at her husband in the same smudged reflection. 'You're doing enough worrying for both of us, don't you think? Besides, I don't give a damn that Richard might be lying dead in a ditch somewhere. I couldn't stand the bastard and his self-righteous airs.'

Karri twisted around to look at her portly husband. 'At least he kept himself trim.'

Tim pulled his shirt ends together and tucked them into his shorts, trying to obscure the parts of his belly that were showing through the gaps. The freckles on his arms looked like a fine spray of mud.

‘There’s no need to be unkind,’ he said. A rivulet of sweat ran down his nose, hovered on the end like a teardrop and fell to the ground. ‘I can’t help being a bit overweight.’

‘You just need to eat less and drink less.’

Tim turned to walk away, his shoulders hunched against further verbal abuse.

Karri snapped, ‘What are you going to do now? Run back and hold Sarah’s hand again?’

Tim turned around slowly. He didn’t know why he was arguing with his wife. He had been on the losing end of every single verbal spat between them since marrying Karri fifteen years earlier. He had discovered very early on in their marriage that being in the right did not prevent his wife lacerating him with her tongue – it did not prevent him walking away from their encounters feeling as bruised and battered as if he had been set upon by thugs in an alley.

He said quietly, groping for some dignity like a man in a dark room looking for the light switch, ‘I don’t know why you have it in for Sarah ... she’s a good, kind woman who needs our help – and sympathy. I am just trying to be supportive, that’s *all!*’

‘You’re pathetic, chasing after that dried-up stick of a woman.’

‘I am not!’ His face was scarlet.

‘I’m not losing any sleep,’ said his wife snidely. ‘She wouldn’t touch you with a Balinese flag pole.’

Tim sucked in his breath, pulling in his stomach as far as it would go and puffing out his chest. He said, ‘I wouldn’t be so sure of that.’

Karri laughed.

Nuri set out for Denpasar.

To stay idle in the small apartment that had been her

home for the last month was too difficult. She had been fidgety and nervous, picking at a loose thread on her blouse, moving the grimy curtains to peer out of the cracked window panes.

Nuri had told her brothers, Abu Bakr and Ramzi, she was shopping for dinner and to please tell Ghani where she was when he came in. Her husband was out, still looking for a suitable location for the religious school they intended to set up in Bali. Nuri wondered why he was determined to press ahead with his plans. Surely, a religious school focused on strict Islamic teachings was doomed to failure in Bali in the wake of the bombs? She had tentatively raised her doubts with Ghani. He had smiled at her and explained that Allah was merely testing their resolve and he would not stumble at the first hurdle placed in his path. Nuri had lowered her eyes and nodded her acquiescence. It was so easy, she thought, to play the dutiful wife – to fall back into the routine of subservience to her husband – the role she had performed unquestioningly from the day of her marriage a year ago to the grizzled older man.

The trip to Bali was the first time Nuri had ever left Sulawesi, the large island shaped like a headless man that was a sparsely populated part of the Indonesian Archipelago. She had taken the crowded dilapidated ferry with her husband and brothers to Java. After a brief visit to the *pesantren* in Solo, the boarding school that Ghani had attended as a boy, to consult with the spiritual leaders there, they had made their way to Bali.

The island was an eye-opener to the young village girl. She had never seen so much alcohol and drugs and contact between men and women. She had been disgusted and embarrassed, averting her eyes from public displays of affection and hurrying past nightclubs and massage parlours with

her eyes fixed on the ground. She had reprimanded her younger brother, Ramzi, when he had been unable to drag his eyes away from the scantily-clad tourists.

Nuri was beautiful with clear skin and widely spaced, almond-shaped eyes that gave her a questioning, naïve expression. She had glossy black hair but it was pinned up and hidden under a scarf. She had abandoned her *hijab*, the head-to-toe black coveralls that included a veil for her face, for the duration of their stay in Bali. Ghani had insisted it would draw too much attention; Bali was an uncomfortable place for Moslems after the bombings. Nuri had agreed, as long as she was allowed to wear a scarf. But even with a length of cloth around her hair, she felt shamefully exposed – as if she was one of the Western women she had seen lying on the beaches in bikinis, their tanned bodies revealed for any passing stranger to see. Nuri shook her head at the memory and a lock of hair escaped from her scarf and fell over her forehead. She tucked it away carefully. She had worn the strict Islamic dress since puberty. Her father, back on Sulawesi, insisted that women play a secondary role in society to their menfolk. Nuri had accepted her father's strictures as being the natural order of things. The only girl in a family of thirteen children by her father's four wives, she knew how rowdy and difficult boys were. Nuri felt more comfortable when she did not offer herself as an object of attraction to men. It was her father's training as well as her own choice.

Her meandering footsteps took her to a small wooden shack with a corrugated tin roof that sold foodstuff to Indonesian labourers. Nuri bought a jar of chilli paste. It would convince her husband and her brothers that she had indeed been shopping for dinner.

All the talk between the other customers was of the bomb-

ings and the investigation but she did not pay much attention. Nuri was not sure how she felt about the blasts. Ghani had said to her that the Balinese had turned their island home into a whorehouse. But she also knew, had learnt to her cost in Bali, that however strict one's religious upbringing, and however much one knew the difference between right and wrong, an unruly heart was difficult to control.