In June 1988, Cameron Bishop, an engaging, disheveled young American freelance journalist, interviews retired Indonesian Air Force Major Petit Muharto about his running the post-war Dutch blockade on RI-022, a war-surplus Dakota cargo aircraft owned and piloted by American naval veteran Bob Freeberg. Muharto relates his adventures with Freeberg from the first blockade run in March 1947, until RI-002 disappeared in October 1948 while flying two tonnes of Republican gold bullion to Sumatra ahead of a feared Dutch invasion of Jogjakarta. Muharto tells Cameron that the RI-002 wreckage was discovered in April 1977, but an investigator by the Air Force only raised more questions than it answered.  
Cameron submits his article to Syd Jardine, a retired foreign correpondent assisting the Jakarta Times, an English-language newspaper set up by a business mogul to promote foreign investment in Indonesia. Syd remarks that Freeberg comes across as a “white savior” singlehandedly responsible for Indonesia gaining freedom from the Dutch. He notes that there were many foreign pilots helping the Indonesians. He suggests Cameron flesh out the story by reading accounts of Freeberg written by foreigners in the region. The newly opened National Library has these books in the reference section. Syd writes an introductory letter on Jakarta Times letterhead to give Cameron access to the restricted stacks. Julia Suryakusuma, an attractive, bookish woman in her early 20s working part-time in the library as she finishes her degree, retrieves a selection of books from the restricted stacks. Most of the authors praise Freeberg for his piloting skills, modesty, and humanity, while others describe him as little more than a criminal.

By lunch time, Cameron is only halfway through the stack of books. Julia invites him to join her at the library canteen. As they eat, Julia tells of her wish to take her post-graduate degree in America, and casually mentions that her father is a military intelligence officer.  
Muharto visits the Jakarta Times to thank Cameron for the story and pick up extra copies to show to former Air Force officers. Many of his old colleagues have asked him about the missing gold, and urge him to research the mystery. Muharto tells of his unsuccessful attempts in 1978 to seeks clues to the mystery Bob returns to Manila and immediately gets a job with CALI.