

One

Huang Long Wei was dead. The *shan chu*, the dragon head, of Pearl River Triad for nearly thirty years suffered for two months after a debilitating stroke. He had celebrated his ninetieth birthday a week before he died, and thirty days ago he died in his sleep, as they say. No one really knows if he had been sleeping or lying awake, staring at the dark ceiling, when his life left him.

This being the thirtieth day, the fourth prayer ceremony and burial were taking place. Tam Bohai, the *fu shan chu*, second in command under Huang was the new dragon head. Huang had been dragon head so long that he outlived the previous *fu shan chu*, who had died eight years ago, so Tam became the second second-in-command. Tam pulled up outside the Huang residence and locked his silver Mercedes. He was irritated to be wearing a brand new expensive navy blue silk suit, knowing that because of Buddhist tradition, he would have to burn it and everything else he was wearing today when he got home. Huang's oldest son, already seventy-two years old, was in deep mourning, and he greeted Tam wearing a black suit. The beautifully made wooden coffin, covered with yellow and white paper prayers, sat in the vestibule. Once the coffin was closed, Tam, Huang's two sons and three others close to Huang would take the coffin outside and let it rest for a while next to the street, breathing in the fresh air.

Tam could smell a wisp of incense in the air as he entered the house. A small red placard was tied by a string to the door latch, helping to guide Huang's spirit back home. Inside, Huang's wife, three daughters and two daughters-in-law, all dressed in black, were kneeling near the coffin. Tam approached the coffin and looked down at the lined face of the old man. In a few minutes, the funeral director would nail the coffin shut, and everyone present would turn away to avoid seeing something that would cause such evil spirits.

After the coffin rested outside, the pallbearers slid it into the back of the hearse, and the driver pulled out into the street. The cars following the procession each carried a small white flag, and Tam hoped that other drivers would hold their tempers as the procession started. Tradition demanded that the hearse drive no more than five miles an hour for the first mile. Alone in his car, he turned on the radio, but the grating song he encountered forced him to turn it off and listen to the quiet instead.

Huang was one of the fortunate ones in Guangdong province. There were so few cemeteries that an average plot cost twice the price of a luxurious condo. The government was trying to solve the problem by encouraging burial at sea or cremation, with the loved ones spreading the ashes somewhere special. However, traditional Buddhist laws specified burial, and Huang and his family were wealthy enough to own plots high up the hill in one of the finest cemeteries near Shenzhen.

Tam parked his car back down the hill and walked up to the hearse, along with many other mourners who were attending the burial. In addition to family and close friends, there were dozens on the hillside who had been business colleagues or acquaintances of Huang, and many of them wore white suits, denoting their relationship. Tam rejoined the others at the hearse, and the six men carried the coffin up the hill to the gravesite. After a few words, the gravediggers started to lower the coffin into the grave, and everyone else present turned away. Once the coffin was at the bottom, and the ropes had been removed, Huang's wife and daughters each threw a shovel full of dirt onto the coffin, then left the site.

As Tam started to head back down to his car, Huang's son stopped him and handed him a red packet full of money.

"Thanks for all your help, Tam," he said, "and be sure to spend this right away, or else something foul will happen to you."

"And thank you, and my blessings to the entire family. The old man would have been proud of the way you honored him. He's been grand to so many families in the Triad. I'm happy to see his own show their love for him."

Tam got into his car. This time he pushed CD on the receiver and was happily surprised when he heard the opening bars of "Nessum Dorma." He'd forgotten what he'd loaded in the multiplay in the trunk.

He drove down toward the bay on his way home. As the afternoon progressed, mist was beginning to thicken along its banks. The old man's beloved river, Zhu Jiang, the Pearl River, lay beyond to the west. The river broadened as it moved south from Guangzhou, then became a wide bay approaching Hong Kong. Shenzhen was on a large bay to the east. Since the turnover in '97, Shenzhen had flourished, and it was now the fourth largest port in the world. The source of so much of the Triad's wealth, financially and spiritually. He decided to take a side trip and turned into a parking lot to make a U-turn, then drove a mile back to Long Pearl, a popular waterfront

bar. He took a seat on a stool looking out over the water and ordered vodka on the rocks. Mt. Shekou stood high in the distance, and he raised his glass to the mountain.

Well, he thought to himself, what are we going to do now? Now that it's really all over, and I'm really shan chu? Just thinking about it made the blood rush to his head with the danger of what they were considering.

Nearly six weeks ago now had been the old man's ninetieth birthday. He was suffering badly, and everyone knew he would only live a few more days. The doctors had told him, and he refused to die lying in a hospital room tied to tubes and a breathing apparatus. Instead, he hired nurses to help him twenty-four hours a day. They brought in an adjustable hospital bed and replaced the one in his bedroom on which he had slept for the last twelve years. A second hospital bed was put out on the top veranda, so he could tilt himself up and see his river. He was not going anywhere that didn't have a view of his river.

To help celebrate his birthday, all the top officers in the Triad had come. Besides Tam, there was Pak Jinhai, the White Paper Fan, chief financial officer. There were the Incense Master, the Vanguard and three sheung fas. No one was missing. They stood around the old man in his bed on the veranda under the huge umbrellas opened for shade. It was July, and it was scorching hot.

The stroke had paralyzed Huang's left side, and he talked with difficulty. For the occasion, he was allowed to drink some beer, and they had fitted his bottle with a straw. He looked around at his people, all of whom had been with him and graduated through the ranks of Triad, as he had.

"After I die," he began, "I want you to do something for me. Think of it as a dying man's last request."

Tam leaned forward and said, "We're listening, Master. Tell us what you want."

"I want you to kidnap Lawrence Kwong. That fat, greasy little man has cost us too much money. I think of him and get a sour taste in my mouth. He takes the joy out of living."

"Inspector Kwong? You want us to kidnap Lawrence Kwong from Hong Kong?"

"That's right. Maybe you don't have to kill him. But maybe you do. I just want him humiliated in front of all the people in Hong Kong. You know how much he cost us? Pak knows. He's White Paper Fan. How much, Pak?"

"I would estimate nearly four and a half billion, Master."

"Yuan?" asked Tam.

“No. Dollars. That would be about twenty-two billion yuan.”

“Incredible!”

“Y’see? That’s why I say he owes us. I think it’s time for payback.”