

Lawrence Kwong wasn't used to moving so fast for so long.

When Lawrence was born, he was so tiny that his parents were fortunate to have a preemie ward in their local hospital east of Wan Chai on Hong Kong Island. When he reached a little more than four pounds, they were allowed to take him home, and his mother felt it right to name such a tiny infant Kwong Wei Li, meaning "lofty plum." She was sure that he would grow into a small, delicate man fit to become a poet, never dreaming that he was destined to become a Chief Inspector with the Hong Kong Police, weighing in at more than 300 pounds.

Otherwise, she might have named him Kwong Wei Min, "people's hero."

Today, he didn't feel like anyone's hero. He was trying to keep up with Matson Tai, his young assistant, who was a mere 21 years old, some forty years Kwong's junior. Matson knew the streets of Kwun Tong, the narrow alleys with their tall apartment buildings and warehouses that had been converted into honeycombs of living spaces. He had grown up just a few blocks from here and was happy to remind Kwong that he never wanted to go back.

The silver tip on Kwong's cane slipped on the cobblestones in the alley he was hurrying through, and he lurched sideways into the adjacent wall, scuffing the elbow of his tweed suit. Attempting anything rapid always took its toll on Kwong. His life was better situated when he was examining the papers left from a reopened cold case or determining the source of a rust stain on a murder victim's hand.

But today he had no choice in the matter. They were searching for Charlotte Lin, a teenage girl who had been kidnapped by the Two Feathers Triad, and while he and Matson were questioning witnesses in the area, Kwong's cell phone had rung.

"Kwong here," he answered.

"Oh, Inspector Kwong, it's Charlotte. Please help me. I'm so frightened. I..." The phone at the other end of the line clicked off.

"Matson, somehow Charlotte found a phone and called me until she was interrupted," announced Kwong. He dialed a number and said, "Kwong here, Lieutenant. I just received a call from Miss Lin herself. Can you trace the source of the call?"

"Wait just a minute, Inspector," answered Lieutenant Lee.

Kwong gave Matson that "I'm waiting, but not happily" look Matson saw so often. A fly from a nearby garbage can landed on Kwong's cane hand, and he blew it off with aggravation.

"Inspector, the call came from a renovated warehouse near you. It's at 345-218 Seng St."

"Thanks, Lee, we'll check it out. Send backup."

To Matson, "345-218 Seng St."

"That's just four blocks from here," said Matson, snapping his fingers. "I'll go slow. Follow me."

But slow to Matson was not like slogging through a marsh. Rather it reminded Kwong of racing the shine on the harbor at sunset. He hurried along and saw Matson slow down two blocks ahead of him.

When he reached him, Matson asked, “There are more than two hundred rentals in this building. Which one is she in?”

“There is only one unit at this address that I know Two Feathers uses. Shall we try that?”

Fortunately for Kwong, the Two Feathers rental was on the third floor rather than the eighth. They climbed the interior stairway and walked quietly down the hallway, listening to the cries of infants and the chatter of multiple TVs.

Matson recognized the powerful smells of kimchee, sesame and bacon fat that he had lived with in times past.

Kwong stopped and looked at a piece of paper he had pulled from the pocket of his vest, then pointed at the door one unit ahead of them on the right.

“There should only be two of them guarding her,” he whispered to Matson. “We have the element of surprise. Draw your gun, but use it only if necessary, and aim for their knees.”

He put his hand delicately on the knob and turned it. It was unlocked, and he threw it open. A tall, slender man with long hair stood with his back to them not ten feet away. The other, stockier with a pockmarked face, was sitting on a couch with a Cocker Spaniel lying in his lap. Kwong swung his cane and swept the closer man’s legs out from under him. Matson stepped forward holding the gun, and the second man frowned and put his hands up, kicking the dog to the floor. It wagged its tail and crossed to Kwong for a treat.

They cuffed them both and called out to Charlotte. Kwong heard the muffled sound of someone speaking through a gag and opened the door to a tiny bedroom. Charlotte lay on a cot,

her wrists bound and her mouth gagged with a cloth. He untied it, and she began to cry with relief.

“Your timing was perfect, young lady,” he said, untying her wrists. “We were just down the street sightseeing.”

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Kwong took off his Harris Tweed jacket and sat down in his office chair. He picked up the phone and asked for a pot of English Breakfast tea, then leaned back, enjoying the comfort of his chosen surroundings in the Tsim Sha Tsui Police Headquarters.

He barely had time to reflect on a case well ended, when it reared up again, and James and Millicent Lin burst into the silence of his office, dragging their daughter behind them and filling the air with high praise for “Chief Inspector Kwong.”

He fought back the sour taste that overwrought emotions tended to bring to him, smiled and invited them to sit. Charlotte moved to a bench at the side of the room and grimaced with embarrassment as her parents took the two large center chairs and gushed over Kwong’s accomplishment.

“And to top it all off,” added James Lin, with a wave, “I was ready to give a bundle of money to those ne’er-do-wells.”

Kwong’s tea arrived, and he offered some to his guests. Charlotte thanked Kwong and accepted a cup, but her father asked, “Don’t you have anything more celebratory?”

Kwong allowed as he did have some 16-year old Scotch, and would they like a glass? With many additional thanks, the Lins took “just a taste,” until most of the bottle was gone.

Thirty minutes later, Kwong took his leave of them to attend the daily office wrap-up that wasn't in fact happening for two hours yet.

Xiao Mingyu finished his remarks on the five-year planned economic boost to be created by the Chinese electric car industry and took his seat in the great hall of the People in Beijing. He tapped his fingers quietly, but impatiently, as the meeting of the 400 elders wound down to its closing gavel, a gavel much like that one used by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Right now, what Xiao wanted was something crunchy to accompany a tall glass filled with gin, lime and tonic. He walked down the forty-nine steps to the vehicle waiting area and climbed into the back seat of his Jaguar Phaeton after his chauffeur, Huiqing, opened it for him. He popped the rear compartment open and poured just two fingers of neat Boodles to while away the drive to his favorite club, whirling the tiny key chain he always kept with him. Suddenly, he doubled over coughing, spilling his gin. He rolled the window down and spat into the street angrily.

“Are you all right, Minister?” asked Huiqing.

“I’m fine, just get me to the club,” he hissed.

Xiao Mingyu was the Vice-Premier in charge of energy and transportation. He was also a member of the Communist Party of China's Politburo and, at 52, one of the youngest men to ever reach the high position he held.

He was born in Huaiji County, Zhaoqing Prefecture, a mining district north of Guangdong, his family’s fourth son. They would always have food to eat and beds to sleep in,

his parents told him, because Xiao's father worked in the wolframite mine. It was difficult and dangerous work, but wolframite was in high demand, being the most important source of tungsten and militarily important. Some nights, Xiao had trouble sleeping because of his father's coughing, brought on by the fumes and dust in the mine.

When little Xiao turned eight, his father died of pulmonary disease, and times turned bad. His mother tried to earn what she could, but finally she had to send three of the four boys away to work, all but the eldest, who would stay with her and care for her when she got older. She contacted a job finder in Guangdong, and he assured her that he would find good jobs for the three boys.

Once in Guangdong, the job finder passed the boys on to the foreman in a rice flour mill, and the three of them began a hard life loading flour sacks, sweeping and cleaning. The plant had constant explosions from the dust, and breathing it made all the boys sick with the same problems their father died of. The three of them slept in one room, and the damp Guangdong air affected them all. The third son died in less than a year.

By the time he was twelve, Xiao was alone in Guangdong. His brother had moved back to their home in Huaiji, but he was determined to make his way in Guangdong, even though the constant coughing affected his growth. He grew tall but thin. He found that his slender hands helped him learn to pick pockets. He joined a street gang that was affiliated with the Communist Party and, through hard work and a sly instinct, worked his way up until he was a cadre that influential people would come to rely on. He swore that he might burn brief, like a candle, but he would never want for anything again.

The Jaguar pulled up in front of an awning in downtown Beijing. The name on the awning was Red Incense. A brass plaque next to the door said “Home of Servers of the People.” Xiao got out and instructed Huiqing to wait for him in the chauffeurs’ quarters down the block. He walked to the double glass and wood doors and stopped. The right door opened, and the doorman bowed and said, “I apologize for making you wait, Minister. Please forgive me.”

Xiao brushed by him and entered the club, enjoying the feeling of his Italian leather soles on the Turkish carpet underfoot. The club, unlike its brashly Chinese name, felt like a British gentlemen’s club, with wainscoting on the papered walls and chandeliers hanging like rain from the high ceiling.

In the second sitting room, he chose a chair by a window and sat down. The porter, dressed in short waistcoat and black slacks, offered him an ottoman, which he accepted. He put his feet up, crossing them at the ankles, and reached in his pocket.

“Dunhill, sir?” asked Shen, the hostess who knew his every like and dislike. She was dressed in a tasteful white shirt with small ruffles at the neck and wrists. Her black skirt was slim and short, and she wore dark stockings and high heels. She extended a silver tray and lit the cigarette with a silver lighter after he put one to his lips. “Your regular, sir?”

“Yes, thank you, Shen,” he answered, inhaling. As she left for his drink, he exploded in a coughing fit, the spike of the smoke hitting his lungs. He cleared his throat and spit into the spittoon next to the chair.

Shen was back immediately, with a gin and tonic, lime on the side, and a bowl of bar crackers and peanuts. He popped a couple into his mouth, chewed them and took a sip of the gin.

Civilized, he thought. I enjoy being civilized, not surrounded by a swarm of needy beggars, all wanting more than they deserve. Just enjoying myself in the way men should.

After finishing a dinner of prime rib and Yorkshire pudding, Xiao pushed himself away from the table to enjoy his eighth smoke of the day. The fact that the three other chairs at the table were empty didn't bother him. He knew how to get along with himself, and most of the time friendly chatter with the other members bored him. True, in the high circles of the group that belonged to this club, a certain amount of interaction was necessary. But he was always happy to spend time alone, having faith that a man in his position would never be ignored for long.

Huang, the manager of the club approached him, smiling. "I trust that everything has been to your satisfaction, Premier?"

"Excellent. My compliments to the chef. I especially liked the way the Brussels sprouts were done. With tarragon, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Minister. He says it balances the bitterness of the sprouts."

"Well, very good, Huang."

"Thank you, and if you don't mind, Minister, I have something special tonight that might interest you."

"And what would that be, Huang?"

"She comes from near Shanghai. She's fourteen. Her name is Lan."

“Oh, very nice. And, if her mother gave her that name, a pale little orchid she is, I’ll wager.”

“She’s just arrived in Beijing, and we thought you would appreciate it if we saved her for you.”

“Indeed. Send a bottle of Campari to my room. And send the girl in fifteen minutes.”

“Very good, Premier.”

Fifteen minutes later, Xiao was sitting in the bed in his regular bedroom at the club sipping a chilled glass of Campari. There was a knock at the door, and he said, “Come in.”

The door opened slightly, and a young girl entered hesitantly, looking around herself at her opulent surroundings. The door closed behind her, and she startled at the sound of the latch.

“Is it Lan?” asked Xiao.

“Yes, sir,” the girl answered.

“Come here, my child.”

She crossed slowly to the foot of the bed. She was wearing a delicate shift of lavender and white, and her long, dark hair hung down her back. The little gold high heels she had been given felt uncomfortable on her feet. She looked at this old man who sat naked in the bed drinking something red. She guessed that she had better say something.

“What are you drinking, sir?”

“It’s called Campari. It’s an aperitif. That means it comes before something,” he chuckled. “Would you like a taste?”

“Is it like rice wine? I don’t like rice wine. It’s sour.”

“Oh, no. Campari is sweet. I think you might like it.”

He poured a glass for her and invited her to come and sit on the edge of the bed. Curious, she took the glass and sat down, taking a tentative sip. It was different, but not unpleasant.

“It’s bitter, but sweet, too,” she said.

“Like life,” Xiao smiled. “You are very young, but you’ve been brought to this strange city to sell your body. Fortunately, fate brought you to me. Many men who would take you to bed would act like animals and never appreciate the fact that you are a lovely little orchid. They’d jump on you and tear your sweetness wide.”

He took a sip of the liquor and refilled her glass, which she had finished. “Do you know who I am, child?”

“No, sir. I only know you are a very important man.”

“I want you to know that my name is Xiao Mingyu. To the rest of the world, I am Philip Xiao, one of the most important men in China.”

He reached out and put his hand on her shoulder. She winced, but didn’t pull away. “Will you call me Ming, my sweet?”

“Yes, sir, er, Ming.”

“Good. Ming is very pleased with your appearance, and he will treat you very gently, like the lovely young lady you are.”

He took her empty glass from her and said, “Now you should remove your little gown and get into bed here with Ming.”

She staggered slightly from the drink as she stood and slipped off the gown, then joined him under the covers, where he was true to his word. He was very gentle, and she cried out only a little.

He took his cigarettes from the bed stand and lit his ninth smoke of the day, inhaling deeply and savoring the feeling of this post-coital smoke. Then, with the cigarette in his mouth, he softly pulled the blankets from her. He bent down and pushed the glowing coal of the cigarette against her labia. She shrieked with pain, and he pulled back and stroked her until she became calm.

He kissed the tears away from her eyes and said, “I’m sorry I had to hurt you like that, but it was necessary. From this day forward, when you touch the center of your love, you will remember that you belong to none other than Xiao Mingyu. I own little Lan now, my darling.”