A person with a backpack is walking away from the viewer. The background is a large, stylized eye graphic with technical drawings overlaid on it. The eye is green and has a grid pattern. The overall color scheme is yellow and orange.

LARS GUIGNARD

A city skyline at night, illuminated with red lights. The buildings are silhouetted against a dark sky. The overall color scheme is red and black.

**LETHAL
CIRCUIT**

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**A Chinese satellite is on a crash course with Earth.
It contains enough plutonium to irradiate a large city.
And that's the good news...**

Michael Chase is a twenty-six year old backpacker, a recent college grad, an amateur. He flew to Hong Kong to find his missing father. Four hours later, he's running for his life. The Chinese Secret Police want him dead. The Conspiracy wants him dead. And the one person who he thinks is on his side, may want him dead too. If Michael is going to live, he'll need to find a hidden piece of Nazi technology lost since World War II. And he'll have to do it before anyone else. Because if he doesn't, a little plutonium is going to be the least of his problems.

Readers praise *LETHAL CIRCUIT*:

"Rockin' fast-paced thriller!!! Strap yourself in for a wild ride as backpacker Michael Chase gets caught up in the world of spies and secret agents." - *Connaisseur* -- 5 Stars

"A Pulse Racing Thriller!" - *Soundograph* -- 5 Stars

"Lars Guignard keeps you hanging at the end of each chapter!" - *David Trail* -- 5 Stars

"A high-octane spy thriller with a great twist ending." - *E.J. Whalen* -- 5 Stars

Gripping -- Complex Characters -- Full of Surprises!

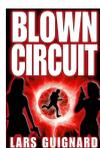
This is thriller entertainment par excellence!

"In this way reminiscent of Stieg Larsson, in others of Robert Ludlum and Michael Crichton, Lars Guignard brings his own polished voice to the thriller genre to stay." - *Jeffrey W. Vanke* -- *Bestselling author of THE BERLIN DECEPTION* -- 5 Stars

LETHAL CIRCUIT is the first in the Michael Chase thriller series. It has been on the Amazon Bestseller Technothriller List since release.

Also by Lars Guignard:

The Circuit Thriller Series:



[*Blown Circuit: A Michael Chase Thriller*](#)

Paranormal Mystery Series:



[*Brood: A Sterling Stränge Investigation*](#)

Middle-Grade Magic Adventure Series:



[*Ghost Leopard \(A Zoe & Zak Adventure\)*](#)

Jade must be chiseled before it can be considered a gem.
Chinese Proverb

Chapter 1

HONG KONG

CHUNGKING MANSIONS. Even the name sounded decrepit. Twenty-seven stories of decaying concrete apartment block that made the worst housing project in America look like the Hilton. The truth was Chungking Mansions wasn't so much a residence as a third world city stuffed into a condemned building occupying some of the most valuable real estate on the planet. Why it still stood was a bureaucratic mystery, but the prevailing theory was that it had taken the place of the old Kowloon Walled City which had been razed years previously.

The old Walled City had been a historical anomaly: an unclaimed property lying in the no man's land between Chinese and British jurisdiction that had grown into a tangled web of vice and commerce the likes of which the world had never seen. There was no law. There was no order. There was only humanity run amok in a group of structures that had slowly but steadily grown into one another until they became one and the same: six and a half acres of madness, fourteen stories high. The old Walled City had finally met the wrecking ball, but its displaced residents had needed some place to go and that place was Chungking. In a word, Chungking was hell, Hong Kong style. It was also home to some of the finest South Indian curry on the Pacific Rim. It was this curry and the ice cold beer that accompanied it that added up to the long trough style urinal Michael Chase now stood before.

Michael stifled a cough as he undid the fly of his cargo shorts. He'd stepped off the plane from Seattle less than four hours earlier and already he thought he might have picked up a case

tuberculosis. No worries, he thought, he was twenty-six and in the best shape of his life. A run of antibiotics and he'd be fine. What mattered now wasn't what disease he might have contracted, or how quickly the beer had run through him, or even how sharply the climbing pack he wore over one shoulder dug into the small of his back. What mattered was that he focus his attention on the task at hand.

Because Michael hadn't flown eight thousand miles to take a leak. He had much more serious business to attend to and right now every ounce of that business revolved around his urinal mate, the man slouched over the trough two feet to his left. One hand poised on the grimy cracked subway tile, the other in his pants, the older man went by the name of Shanghai Larry, and as he stood there, his tired Eurasian features twisted into an alcoholic stupor, Michael reflected that the moniker could hardly be more appropriate. Salt-and-pepper hair curling just above the tops of his ears and a perfect mole on his chin, if anybody had one foot on Bond Street and the other on the Bund, Larry was the man. The restroom door opened, flooding the shadows with light, and Michael steeled his nerve. It was now or never. Zipping back up, he turned to Larry and uttered the words he'd traveled so far to say.

"I know what you did," he said. "I know that you killed my father."

• • •

OUTSIDE THE RESTROOM door, the woman listened intently.

She was tired, but she suspected that if there was any truth to what she had overheard, her evening had just begun. She stepped away from the door as a third man entered the restroom. Unlike the men inside, this man moved deliberately. As if he had something important to do. Something more than to relieve himself. The woman knew she needed to get closer. She slipped in the swinging door before it shut. Now, as she stood in the outer vestibule, a five-foot partition wall providing just enough cover to hide her from where the men were lined up at the trough, she praised her instincts. Even if she was wrong about the third man, there was definitely something up with Michael. Something a whole lot bigger than he had previously let on. She listened intently to Larry's reply.

"That's a hell of an accusation, Sport."

"It's not an accusation. It's a fact. You were the last to see him alive. You two had some kind of issue. You owed him money."

"Doesn't mean I killed him."

"Get real, Larry."

"Listen, Sport, I know this is a difficult time for you."

"Cut the Sport shit. If you didn't do it, who did?"

Larry ran a hand through his thick head of hair. "Pay attention, I'm serious here. It's looked bad for me from the beginning. But I'm not your man. I never was. And I can prove it."

"How?"

"Your dad —"

"Yeah, Larry?"

"He sent me this."

Michael forced himself to breathe as Larry zipped up and reached drunkenly into his jacket pocket. He had noticed their new urinal mate, a powerfully built Chinese man with a pock-marked face and zebra striped hair, but paid him little heed. His concern now was Larry — Larry who had pulled a cell phone from his pocket and was lazily tapping its dirty touch screen. When a video finally began to play on the phone's display, the first thing Michael noticed was the lack of sound. Apparently the volume was off. The next thing he noticed was that the man on the screen was his father. He was

bearded and looked very tired, black circles under his eyes, but it was his dad, anybody could see that. Then, before he could get a better look, all hell broke loose.

Michael had caught a glimpse of the lean, tan woman entering the restroom behind him. He was well aware that her name was Kate, but that didn't concern him at present. What concerned him was how quickly the man with the zebra striped hair had managed to interject his stout frame between Larry and himself. In that moment Larry seemed to recognize that something was very wrong because he pulled the cell phone back. Then, Zebra bent to his side and Michael saw what looked like a tattooed snake wrestling a tiger inked to the base of his muscular neck. A quarter second later Zebra had produced a black alloy butterfly knife from the depths of his long leather jacket. Michael stepped back. Zebra unfolded the knife in a smooth flick of the wrist, pressing the two halves of its handle together to form a lethal weapon.

What happened next was fragmented. Michael saw the glint of the blade under the flicker of the fluorescent light. He heard Larry let out a blood curdling moan. Then he saw the phone slide across the grimy tile, followed by Larry's collapse to the floor. Blood covered Larry's white French-cut shirt and more was flowing out. Even in the poor light Michael could see that he had been stabbed in the heart, and though he immediately brought his hand to Larry's chest to stem the bleeding, his attention was torn. Zebra, a mere ten feet away, had stooped down to pick up the cell phone. He wrapped his fingers around it, idly scooping it up like he had all the time in the world. And that's when the woman smashed him on the head.

Zebra went down in a slow motion thud. Like he'd been switched off. And then for a second, maybe more, all was quiet. Michael couldn't be sure what the woman had used to hit him, but it was irrelevant. The net effect was that Zebra was now splayed out unconscious on the filthy bathroom floor beside Larry, blood trickling down from behind his left ear. Michael was uncertain of the number of men who next entered the restroom. All he knew was that they wore turbans and that upon seeing the carnage they ran out as quickly as they had come in. The men gone, Michael knelt on the floor. He lifted a blood soaked hand from Larry's heart and placed two fingers on his neck to check his pulse. He was silent for a long moment before looking up at the woman who stared down at him from the corner of the room.

"He's dead," Michael said flatly.

The woman nodded, eyeing Zebra warily as she stooped down to pick up the bloody cell phone. She had barely grasped it in her hand before the sound of her breath was drowned out by a shrill fire alarm. It was followed by what sounded like movement on the floors below and then the pounding echo of jackboots in the stairwell. She cast her gaze at Zebra's tiger-snake tattoo before redirecting it to the broken bathroom window.

"Follow me," she said. "Follow me or die."

Chapter 2

IT WAS A good twenty-five-foot drop from the broken bathroom window to the trash strewn room below. But it was survivable. Michael knew because the woman had already jumped. So he jumped. Off the window ledge. And down. Michael didn't know how long he was airborne, probably just over a second, but the landing was as he had expected, jarring but manageable. He landed on his feet, hitting the refuse pile just as the woman shook herself free of it.

The trash was maybe two feet deep and damp. It had obviously rained recently. Michael had no idea why Chungking's residents chose to dispose of their refuse as though the Middle Ages were alive and well, but he didn't care. Not right now anyway. Besides, it was mostly packaging and fast-food wrappers; the odor emitted not so much fetid as sweet, creating the illusion that whatever he was trudging through was no worse than a freshly fertilized field. A long-tailed rat scurried through the trash in front of him and Michael made every effort to turn his mind to pleasanter thoughts than the plague.

Michael was six-three and weighed in at about a hundred ninety pounds, but even with his lean strength, trekking through the deep trash was no cake walk. He picked his way after the woman carefully, thankful for the heavy-duty trail running shoes he wore. Then, as the woman stopped abruptly at the far wall, he followed her gaze down. Between the masonry wall of the adjoining building and the roof he stood upon was a fourteen-inch crack extending at least twelve stories down. A drain pipe threaded down the crack to what Michael could just make out as the alley below.

"Tell me you're kidding."

The woman simply eyed the bathroom window. There were voices up there. Movement. Then a beam of light swept the roof.

"Get down."

Michael ducked under a wet cardboard box, but he wasn't quick enough. The flashlight beam hit his back and a shrill scream rang out in Cantonese. The woman didn't bother waiting. Michael looked up to see that she had already disappeared into the crack between the buildings. Then, without further warning, the report of a pistol cracked through the night air. Michael rolled toward the roof's edge. Though he was loathe to do so, he saw little choice but to descend. Pulling the backpack from his back, he tossed it between the buildings. The pack was too wide at first, but with a good shove he was able to get it to fall. The beam of light bounced back and forth across the roof. There were more shots now, but they were scattered. Obviously the shooters didn't have a bead on him yet, but Michael didn't want to stick around until they did. He pulled his lanky frame up and over, grasping the cast-iron drainpipe as he slipped his body into the crack. A natural athleticism had always been a part of Michael's life, but the bullets were something he hadn't experienced in a long time. They added an element of urgency to the proceedings he could happily do without.

The drainpipe was wet, water overflowing from the gutter above. He had heard his backpack hit the ground, the four or five seconds it had taken it only emphasizing the length of the descent ahead of him. He could no longer hear the shouting above, but now, as Michael crept down the crack foot by foot, gray water streaming down the walls, he felt like a river was closing in around him. Michael had an issue with tight spaces. He didn't like the label claustrophobic, but it didn't make it any less true.

Nine years ago now, Michael had endured an experience that had changed him. That event still haunted him and even though he knew rationally speaking that the walls on either side of him were fourteen inches apart and barring any unexpected earth movement, they would stay that way, it didn't matter. What would happen if the walls narrowed to the point that he would no longer be able to move down? Working against gravity, he'd no longer be able to climb up either. He would be stuck there, caught between two slabs of wet concrete twelve stories high, and the feeling chilled him to the bone.

But Michael also knew that he had to get to the bottom before the men with guns. Add to that, the woman was nowhere to be seen. He had to assume she had made it to the street below. It couldn't be far now. So, taking hold of the drainpipe with both hands, he retired the downward stepping motion he had been using and simply hung in the crack, lowering himself down the drainpipe hand over hand. It was quicker this way. Much quicker. And just when Michael began to fall into a rhythm he felt the world open up around him. The rear wall of the crack fell away and Michael found himself in a covered alley. He slid down the last few feet of the drainpipe landing next to the woman who stood immobile, the noise of the street audible from the end of the alley.

But it wasn't over yet. Because the woman didn't stir. Didn't even flinch. And when Michael followed her gaze to the end of the passageway he saw why. They had been quick, but not quick enough. Somehow Zebra, sporting a nasty gash above his left eye, had gotten down before them. Michael suspected he had found a fire escape, but it didn't much matter now. He was there. And he had put away the butterfly knife in favor of an automatic weapon.

Michael knew his way around a gun. Not just because he was a red-blooded American, but because his father had taught him how to shoot and more importantly how to respect firearms. It was something he had always been thankful for, regardless of what side of the debate was popular among the company he found himself in. Right now, though, the debate had gone from the academic to the visceral. He was facing down what looked like a machine pistol, probably a fully automatic TEC-9 capable of spraying lead from one side of the alley to the other. It wasn't a terribly accurate weapon but it was vicious, and Michael knew that it packed enough of a punch to leave both him and the woman dead before they hit the ground.

Michael considered their options. Running was always a good one, but with a brick wall behind them it meant sprinting headlong into a spray of bullets. The other choice was to fight. Fight or flight, he thought. It always came down to one or the other. Except on those odd occasions when another predator entered the fray.

A set of powerful xenon headlights lit up the alley. They were closely followed by the low growl of a big block engine as a vehicle bore down on Zebra from behind. Michael and the woman took either side of the alley wall, but strangely Zebra didn't flinch. He simply glanced back at the speeding car as if he expected it, as if he were counting on it. He then turned his attention forward and fired the gun.

Michael could tell by the muzzle flash that the shots went high. Way high, because what Zebra obviously hadn't anticipated was the fact that the vehicle would run him squarely over. The car, now clearly visible as a black Mercedes S-Class sedan hit him with such force that Michael was sure he heard the crack of bones. Zebra rolled up over the front bumper and down the right fender, taking the hood ornament along with him for good measure. Then a strange thing happened. The car didn't lurch forward or away, it didn't spin its tires, or rev its engine menacingly. It simply crawled ahead, giving them ample berth, the rear passenger window rolling a smooth three inches down. There was a silence before a cracked voice spoke from the darkness within.

"You owe me a favor, Mr. Chase."

Michael peered through the gap in the glass, but could make out no more than the shadowy outline of an old man.

“How do you know my name?”

Michael’s only response was the sound of heavy boots on the tin roof above, flashlight beams scouring the edges of the covered alley. Then, the window closed and the sedan reversed away.

“Friend of yours?” the woman asked.

“I never saw him before in my life.”

“He seemed to know you.”

“Yeah, I got that.”

The woman seemed to think about it. “We’ll worry about that later,” she said. “For now, you stick with me.”

The way she said it, like they were already old friends, Michael couldn’t help but cast his mind back on how the evening had begun.

Chapter 3

CHUNGKING MANSIONS - TWO HOURS EARLIER

THE REASONS FOR Michael's trip to Hong Kong were complicated, but they boiled down to this. His father had disappeared unexpectedly while on a business trip to China just over six months earlier. The official investigation into his father's disappearance had been short but sweet, netting nothing but a one-line explanation and a death certificate. Per the official report, his dad's speeding vehicle had plunged into a river gorge, and though the body was never recovered, it was determined that no one could have survived the fall. That was it. It was all Michael and his family got. When it became evident that no remains would be found, they had held the funeral just over a month later. To say that had been a difficult time for Michael would be to miss the point entirely. It had been devastating.

The news had come one night while Michael was cloistered in his garage apartment in Seattle's old Belltown neighborhood. He had just gotten off his shift at Starbucks, the original store down by Pike Place Market, and was now at work on a proprietary piece of computer code. Michael had been floundering, just treading water for awhile now. He had no idea what he wanted to do with his life and it showed. His apartment, like his plan for the future, was a mess. He had done a double major in computer science and history at college, but instead of going to work for the Facebooks of this world he had decided to try life on his own terms for awhile. His own terms meant a variety of jobs and locales. No commitment, but no real progress either. With the code he was working on, he hoped to break free from the cycle of twenty-something malaise he found himself in. He knew it himself. If he could just commit to something, anything, things would work out for him. With this little piece of code, Michael thought he might just get on track. It could be something big. Maybe not Google big, but big nevertheless. If he could just get the application up and running, he had planned to present to venture capitalists in the coming weeks. Instead he had found himself picking out caskets.

Michael was fairly certain his father would have rather burned, but the lack of remains made the choice of cremation problematic. Both his younger sister and mother wanted a symbol, a coffin to lay to rest, even if it was empty. So as the eldest son, Michael had dutifully obliged. He picked out a coffin, he picked out a headstone, he even picked out the flowers, all while his mother sat lost in her La-Z-Boy, staring at the rain. The funeral had come and gone and Michael decided that the quickest way to get back to normal would be to act as though everything was normal. He rang up customers, brewed frothed cappuccino, he even presented to the venture capitalists, but as much as he wanted it to be, his heart wasn't in it. They passed on the project. And that's when Michael got the call.

It wasn't a call really, it was a text, but its meaning was clear. His father's death hadn't been an accident. There was foul play involved. The message had come from a guy named Ted Fairfield, an old family friend and business associate of his dad's. The text didn't say much else other than the fact that Ted would contact him again. Six months later and here he was, half a world away in the back room of a broken down Indian restaurant about to come face to face with the person who would change his life.

"Come here."

Ted Fairfield rose from the table. As always, Ted's smile was as wide as an airplane hangar, his

thinning gray hair tied back into a sparse ponytail. Ted opened his arms and Michael reciprocated with a hug. Ted had not only been a business associate of his father's but was also his dad's closest confidant. He was in his late fifties and lean and fit, his enormous toothy grin belying the fine lines on his face. Ted had always been there for Michael. When the news of his father's death had come, it had been Ted who had brought it. Ted had been a pallbearer. Ted had spoken at the funeral. And Ted, of course, had arranged for tonight's dinner. Seeing him now, in this strange place, caused Michael to feel a warmth he wouldn't have thought possible under the circumstances, the warmth of family. Ted released Michael from his bear hug grasp, allowing a second man to speak.

"You're late, Sport."

The man was in his mid-forties, and though Michael hadn't actually met him before, he knew this had to be his father's business associate, Larry Wu — or as just about everybody knew him — Shanghai Larry. Larry worked for a multinational company that manufactured in the region and had also been a colleague of his dad's.

"Take a load off," Larry purred, rising from his seat unsteadily to shake Michael's hand. "You're your father's son all right. Your father's son all over."

Larry released Michael's hand, giving Michael the opportunity to drop his pack and cast his glance down the length of the rickety table. Larry was without a doubt the most formally dressed of the bunch that sat there, and judging from appearances, the least able to hold his liquor. In fact, Michael thought if one of these things was not like the other, it was definitely Larry with his thousand dollar pinstriped suit and perfectly clipped salt-and-pepper hair.

As Ted made introductions around the table, it didn't take long to realize that the rest of the group screamed of a wholly different aesthetic. They were younger, of course, but that was far from all of it. They seemed somehow connected. As though they belonged to some kind of secret club Michael could never join. There was a lanky Scotsman sporting dreadlocks and a pork pie hat who went by the name of Crust; a bubbly tanned Australian girl by the name of Song; a shorter guy with some serious facial hair and a French accent whose name Michael didn't quite catch; and last of all, a low-key brunette who was introduced as Kate. It was Kate who sparked Michael's interest.

About five-ten with a clear complexion and an aquiline nose, she was somewhere in her mid-twenties, her wide almond eyes lending her an air of sophistication that Michael couldn't quite put his finger on. When she spoke, her accent was to Michael's ear completely neutral, suggesting a solid Midwestern lineage, but something about the way she held herself told Michael that though her accent might be American, she wasn't. She wore a rough cut white linen blouse, a long skirt, and a copper bracelet which seemed to be, as near as Michael could make out, yoga hiker chic. It was the kind of ensemble that would be just as at home at work as it would be at play, but Michael knew he was applying Seattle standards to what was undoubtedly a very different kind of woman. Fortunately, Larry interrupted before he could gawk any longer.

"So, Michael. Fresh out of Chek Lap Kok, I hear?" Chek Lap Kok was Hong Kong's ultramodern airport and, given its ease of use, a preferred gateway to the East.

Michael checked his watch. "Ninety minutes and counting."

"Well you couldn't have picked a better place to land." Larry pushed a big plate of curry Michael's way and signaled the waiter for another bottle of beer. "When Teddy said I should come out and say hi, I didn't know he'd have a whole table of fresh faces for me to meet." He looked around the table, eyes glazed over. "Now where in the world were we?"

"Malaysia," Kate said.

"Ahh, yes. Malaysia."

“I wouldn’t be caught with a lone spliff in that God forsaken country,” Crust said. “Those buggers will hang you for humming along with Bob Marley.” Crust must have read the incredulity on Michael’s face because he went on. “But the good news is, your gruel, the months of imprisonment during your trial, even the length of rope they use to string you up, none of it will cost you a penny.” Crust took a swig of his beer. “If, however, you were to step out of this fine city of Hong Kong, into China proper, you’d be looking at a whole new cricket match. You do the crime, they throw you in prison, and not only do you have to work twenty-one hour days vulcanizing rubber to pay your way, your family gets the bill for the bullet after the firing squad.”

Crust lowered his voice to a whisper. “I’ve heard from a reliable source, and not some gap year tourist by the way, but someone in government, that some of these executioners are such bad shots that the poor families end up paying twice. Two bullets. Sometimes even three. Best case scenario you get busted, they imprison you in a munitions factory and your family gets a trade discount on the shells.”

Larry laughed drunkenly but Crust went on, “I kid you not, the court hears daily requests for imprisonment in armament factories, hence Crust’s number one rule for round the world travel: something goes down....”

To Michael’s surprise, a chorus sounded around the table: “Don’t stick around.”

As tall bottles of beer were toasted in the air, Michael reflected that this was it — the Circuit — the round-the-world backpacking trail upon which travelers of all ages and stripes met up time and time again. There were a thousand variations to it, but a typical broad strokes tour on the Circuit might mean working up the required traveling funds in London, catching a cheap flight to Kenya, maybe hopping a safari before lounging on the island of Lamu, then jumping to India for a stint in Goa followed by a sabbatical in Thailand, or a brush with Bali. Circuit goers were ever working their way eastward for a little urban entertainment, which is where Hong Kong entered the equation. From there they might double back into South Asia, or head out across Siberia before refueling for funds in suitably affluent Western land. It was a big world, and there were a million ways around it, but a good backpacker could always count on running into his cronies in the local hot spots, the ones only the other backpackers knew about. Michael had first heard about the Circuit years before, but he delayed actually getting on it until he at least had college behind him. Or he had a reason. Now he had both.

The Frenchman must have been about done with Crust’s sermonizing because he put his arm around him and said, “This man has been traveling for too long, no?”

Michael wasn’t sure if the question was rhetorical, but the Frenchman quickly followed it up with another query; one that was bound to come up sooner or later.

“So, tell me, Michael, where are you backpacking on our lonely little planet?”

Michael had already sensed that travel itineraries were more than a simple A to B with this crowd. What he was about to find out though, was how much more. He coughed to clear his throat, reflecting back on the Chinese geography he had picked up from his guide book. “I was thinking,” he said, “I’ll kick around Hong Kong a bit, then ease my way north up the Pearl River Delta to Guangzhou, before heading a ways west to Guilin and Yangshuo, then maybe onto Kunming.”

The table lapsed into silence. Finally, Kate asked, “Why Yangshuo?”

“My father spent some time there years ago. He always used to talk about it.”

“That’s,” Crust said with little enthusiasm, “interesting.”

Kate sprung to Michael’s defense. “Lay off, Crust.”

“What? I’m talking about the route, not his dad.”

“So am I,” Kate said. “The Hong Kong—Yangshuo Express. It’s a great route. A classic. We’ve already done it.”

“Like I said, it’s interesting.”

“You said interesting like it was day old bread.”

“Okay, you got me. It’s just that Yangshuo, so early in the game, I don’t know if Michael here is ready for its simple pleasures.”

Kate slid a palm over Crust’s mouth. “It’s a great route, Michael. A good first leg in China and Crust is just jealous. He’ll be getting his ass bit off by malarial bugs, drinking from tire treads in Tibet when he could be joining you.”

Crust rose to his own defense. “Not true.”

Kate didn’t back down. “Tell me you wouldn’t prefer to kick back with a banana pancake contemplating your next rub down instead of bribing some corrupt PSB official to sign your permit so you can set up your frozen teepee on the leeward side of Mount Kailash.”

“Kailash is in the Himalayas.”

“Hmm, banana pancake,” Kate weighed out the options like the scales of justice, “frozen balls.” She looked Michael in the eye. “It’s a good route. You’re going to have a great time.”

It was at that moment that Shanghai Larry, whom Michael was convinced had been slumbering in the corner, came to life.

“Great time. Fantastic time. Tickly-boo like a pussy tourist in Patpong.” Looks were exchanged around the table, but Larry went on. “But it doesn’t really matter, does it, Michael? Because he hasn’t told you what he’s really doing here.” Larry pulled his shoulders up from a full body slouch as he stretched his arms high, lowering his voice conspiratorially. “Sport, here, has come to find his father.”

He followed his grand pronouncement with a belch before rising from the table. “Piss anyone?” A moment later Larry’s knees buckled out from under him and Michael knew in earnest that the evening had begun.

Chapter 4

KOWLOON 0100 HKT

TWO MURDERS AND forty minutes later and they were lost in the neon crowds of Nathan Road. Michael had removed his bloody t-shirt and pulled on a clean white one from his backpack. He was running on adrenalin and he knew as much. You couldn't be shot at, roll through the trash, and watch a man die without taking some of that with you. And right now, Michael felt as though he had taken it all. In truth, Michael was acquainted with violence. At his father's behest he had trained in the Shito Ryu style of karate since he was a kid, earning his junior black belt at the age of sixteen and going on to get his first real belt and Second Dan in college. Oddly, in the age of ultimate fighting, karate had a bit of an old lady image to it, but it was a martial art and martial meant war. It was meant to prepare you for battle.

That was the theory anyhow. In practice, real violence, the kind where your opponent wasn't bound by a set of tournament rules, was a whole lot more visceral than any martial art. Michael knew this first hand, even though he often wished he didn't. And so, even though he felt a strong desire to slow down and clear his head, now wasn't the time and he knew as much. The police were no doubt already scouring the city. Given the quick escalation of the evening's events, what mattered in the near term was that they get away.

The electric intensity of Hong Kong wasn't helping Michael's state of mind. There were people everywhere. It wasn't like Seattle, or even a busy evening in Manhattan; here it was the middle of the night and it looked like a coliseum had emptied on every glittering block.

Following Kate through the crazy crowds, Michael noted that they stopped and started frequently. Kate checking her back constantly to determine whether they were being followed. When, after a series of circuitous stops and starts, they finally arrived outside a hulking residential skyscraper, Michael had the distinct feeling they weren't far from where they had started. Kate took him around a side entrance and they entered a swinging security door marked in flaked gold leaf with the words Mirador Mansion. Michael knew they needed a safe place to regroup and as such didn't question Kate as she led him up the dingy concrete steps of the tenement. When, however, they stopped before a dirty pink door that read "Happy Tom's," Michael had to wonder. Kate must have read his look because her reply was absolute.

"We'll be safe here."

"With Happy Tom?"

"You need to trust me."

Kate opened the metal door with a grating squeak and Michael was served his second look at the international backpacking scene. Happy Tom's was a guest house, a hostel where travelers of all sorts put up for the night, and even at this late hour they were everywhere. A blonde Swede brushed her teeth while studying the notices tacked to a decaying corkboard; a black backpacker with bright red braids kicked back reading a Lonely Planet guidebook; and a waif of a girl who looked like she couldn't have been more than sixteen pecked out an e-mail at an aging computer terminal.

Kate nudged Michael forward into the narrow hall leading out of the tiny common room. He passed

a communal bathroom, followed by an open doorway. Inside Michael saw backpackers snoring on racks of floor to ceiling metal bunks. Kate continued forward another two steps and inserted a key into a door at the far end of the hall. Ensuring that no one was watching, she opened the door. It wasn't a regular room at the hostel, that much was clear. Brooms and cleaning supplies lined the walls. But there was also a single metal cot complete with trundle bed. She shut the door and flipped on a light.

"We need to talk," Kate said.

"Here?"

"You have a better idea?"

Michael drummed his fingers on a jug of bleach. "Yeah. We could go to the police. Tell them what happened."

Kate almost laughed before lowering her voice to a whisper. "This isn't America. There's no innocent until proven guilty. There's only guilty and more guilty and as far as I could tell, you have blood all over you."

"I didn't kill him."

"You fled the scene."

"It was your idea to leave."

"To save your ass."

"And why would you do that?" Michael asked. "You don't even know me."

Kate took a seat on the drooping cot. "Call it a character flaw," she said. "You were in trouble, I helped out. All I want in return is an explanation."

Michael averted his eyes, glancing around the closet-sized space. "Look, it's not you personally. I just don't want to pull anybody else into this."

"You don't think it's kind of late for that?"

It was true. She was involved now. Almost as involved as he was. "What do you want to know?"

"You accused Larry of murdering your father."

Michael felt a lump grow in his throat. "Are you sure we're good here?"

"For now."

"Then here goes." He dropped his pack, taking a seat on the far end of the drooping mattress. "My dad worked for a big athletic shoe company. The kind with lots of Madison Avenue marketing and product manufactured wherever it was cheapest to do it."

"Nike? Adidas?"

"It doesn't matter. The point is, he traveled a lot. While I was growing up, my dad spent a lot of time out of town. He was always there when we needed him, but work kept him away a lot of the time."

"Somehow I don't think two dead guys are about a lack of quality time with dear old dad."

Michael rolled his tongue inside his mouth and said, "About six months ago, he didn't come home at all. The official explanation was an automobile accident west of here in Guanxi Province. They said his car plummeted to the bottom of a river gorge. His body was never recovered." Michael unzipped the top compartment of his backpack. "Larry was the last to see him alive." Michael removed a letter-sized envelope. "Five days ago I got this in the mail."

Opening the envelope, Michael pulled out a paper airline ticket for travel between Seattle and Hong Kong. Across the back of it was a simple message scrawled in a violent hand.

It read: "LARRY DID IT."

Kate examined the envelope. "It's postmarked Kowloon Central. No return address. You took this to mean that Larry murdered your father?"

“How would you take it?”

“Probably like that.” Kate considered the implications. “What do you think now?”

“Now I don’t know what to think.”

“So the backpacking bit, the route you were going to take?”

“In the event that Larry was a dead end,” Michael winced at his choice of words, “I knew my dad was last seen out here. I came to find out what happened to him.”

“So what are you waiting for?”

Kate reached into her daypack and without another word tossed him Larry’s bloody cell phone. It was an Android smartphone, probably less than a year old, and if you looked past the blood, barely used. After a moment’s hesitation, Michael woke the device from sleep mode. Then he hit play.

The first thing about the video clip Michael noticed was the room. It had stark concrete walls, almost like a cell. A battered metal door was visible in one corner. An incandescent bulb hung from the ceiling above a gray metal table. To the side of the table was a gray tubular metal chair. Michael’s father stood between the table and chair. He had several days’ growth of gray beard and his wispy hair was greasy, falling haphazardly over his forehead. From the video, he looked to be in his mid-sixties, though Michael knew him to be younger than that. His father’s eyes burnt like hot embers, despite his obvious fatigue. He wore a simple oxford shirt, the collar open. Michael paid special attention to his neck, because even in this medium shot, he recognized the pendant—three small stars offset in a silver ring—that his father wore.

“What’s he saying?”

Michael realized that the volume was still turned off on the phone. He turned it up.

“One, two, four, six, one, three, eight —”

“Start it from the beginning.”

Michael replayed the message, this time with the volume on.

“Eight, five, six —”

“It’s like he’s reading off the weekly lotto draw.”

His father finished uttering the digits, sixteen of them, all a number between zero and nine, and the screen went blank. That was it. Michael checked the phone, but there was little else. No outgoing calls, nothing in the address book, no cached web pages, no apps, no games, nothing except a record of a single incoming call.

“Either Larry’s really unpopular —”

“Or he purged the phone.”

Michael shared a glance with Kate and did the most expedient thing in the book. He tapped the redial button. There were the telltale tones of digits being dialed, followed by the sound of a connection being made, followed by nothing at all. Dead air.

“Who are you?” Michael asked.

The connection was cut. Michael immediately dialed again, but this time the call wouldn’t go through. He tried for a third time, but it was the same story. Frustrated, he tossed the phone to the bed. Even at this late hour, horns and traffic were audible outside the old building. To say Hong Kong never slept was a cliché. Hong Kong didn’t even slow down to catch its breath.

Michael watched as Kate picked up the phone. Maybe she thought she could find something else. Something he hadn’t seen. She hit the play icon again, watching his father’s video message one more time. Then, about halfway through, she paused it and hit another key. Then she just stared. As if she had seen something unexpected. Something impossible.

“What is it?”

Kate turned the screen toward Michael. There was an information window opened over the still video frame of his father's gaunt face.

"The message is dated April 25."

"That makes no sense. He didn't go missing until October."

"April 25th of this year."

Michael took hold of the phone and looked himself. It was true, the time stamp read 1:36PM HK April 25th of the current year.

"You know what that means?" Kate said.

Michael just looked at her. He wasn't a fool. He knew what it meant.

"As of five days ago, your father was alive."

Chapter 5

THE FIRST THING Michael's father taught him was courage. Michael remembered it well. He was just five years old. They had moved to a new town and Michael was scared. He had just gotten used to his old kindergarten and now he had to go to a new one. To make matters worse, today was Halloween. All the kids were to report to school in costume. Michael's mom and dad knew about Halloween and they made sure that Michael had a costume to wear that morning. But Michael didn't want to go. All of a sudden his green dinosaur costume seemed really lame. All the other kids were probably princesses or pirates. They would laugh at a dinosaur.

So Michael's dad made him a deal. He said Michael didn't have to go if he didn't want to. The school would always be there. He could stay home all week if he wanted. But Michael's dad also reminded him that dinosaurs were an important part of Halloween. Maybe the most important part. Dinosaurs stopped the princesses and pirates from tearing each other to pieces. If Michael didn't go to school, he might have a fine day playing Play-Doh and watching cartoons, but who would protect the pirates? Michael saw the logic. Somebody had to keep the peace. He attended his first morning at the new kindergarten in full dinosaur regalia. Happily, not a princess or pirate was lost all day.

AS OF FIVE days ago his father was alive. Kate's words hit Michael like a hot poker. It wasn't that Michael hadn't hoped it, hadn't dreamed it even, but to have another human being utter those words just made them that much more real. Even if they turned out to be a lie. And it was for this reason that upon hearing Kate say the words, Michael made it his business to get as far away from her as possible. Even if everything changed, he wanted to keep the illusion alive. Besides, she'd already seen the video. He didn't owe her anything more than that.

But getting out of the tiny room without alerting Kate turned out to be more of a task than he had imagined. She seemed to sleep with one eye open and his first visit to the washroom amounted to her practically showing him the way. Only after a mumbled explanation regarding the flaming curry and three subsequent trips to the can was Michael able to shake the interest of his ever vigilant roommate. On his fourth trip to the washroom, less than half an hour before dawn, Michael retrieved his backpack from the storage locker in the hallway and continued out of Happy Tom's and into the twilight.

Michael suspected that he had little time before Kate realized he wasn't coming back, but his bigger concern was that the police were still looking for him. After all, the debacle at Chungking had taken place less than four hours earlier. They might be winding down their search, but he doubted they'd have completed it. For this reason Michael was pleased to note that the Westrail Station he needed to reach was less than a twenty minute walk away. The mass transit map he'd picked up at Chek Lap Kok clearly indicated he could take the MTR, Hong Kong's highly efficient subway, to the station, but he knew he'd already be taking a risk riding light rail out of the city. There was no reason to compound the problem by walking into a subway station where the police could well be checking for identification.

As it was, the brisk walk in the pre-dawn light gave Michael the perspective he had been craving. Neon signs faded gently against a gradually lightening sky and before he knew it, Michael had located the Westrail station. He purposely chose not the main concourse which was located in a shopping

mall, but a smaller elevated outdoor platform about a five minute walk past. There, after a wait that couldn't have lasted more than a minute on the already busy platform, the white train whooshed to stop and he stepped aboard, taking his stainless steel seat.

Soon, the dense urban jungle of Kowloon proper was behind him, replaced by the lush landscape of Hong Kong's New Territories. The New Territories were so named because they were the last piece of colonial Hong Kong to be leased to the British. They were also the last stop before China proper and the answers that country held hidden. Michael mulled on the thought as the tin-roofed shanties of the green hills flew past. He wanted to believe that his father was alive. He wanted to believe it so badly that it hurt. It was, after all, this secret hope that had driven him to fly across an ocean. But he had already buried his father. He had thrown the last handful of dirt as the empty casket was creakily lowered into the rain soaked ground. To have to reevaluate those fundamental assumptions, to have to truly consider that his father might still be living was a difficult proposal. Not because Michael didn't want his dad to be alive. But because he didn't want to go through the pain of losing him all over again.

Michael also realized, however, that what he wanted was largely irrelevant. He knew that if there was even a chance that his father was out there, he needed his help. And it went without saying that Michael would go to the ends of the Earth to help him, which is why upon hearing his father recite the sixteen digit number, Michael knew exactly what he needed to do.

Number one was to immediately commit the number to memory. It was something he'd been able to do ever since he'd learned to count. He didn't know if he had an eidetic memory or not, he'd never been tested, but running the number over in his mind he had recognized what it was. It wasn't a lottery number, or a telephone number, or even a code. It was much simpler than that. It was a simple GPS waypoint—coordinates that designated a precise latitude and longitude and one look at Kate had told him that she knew exactly what it was as well, however well she might have tried to hide it.

It wasn't an accident that his father would send him a message like this. Some of Michael's fondest childhood memories were of times spent hiking with his father in the back country of the Pacific Northwest's Cascade Range. They'd hike in the mountains for days, sometimes even venturing up the Coast Range in Canada, always excited about what the new day would hold and always carrying a GPS receiver en route. They'd never needed to rely on it per se, but it was nice to know that absent a map, there would always be a way back.

Now, a sixteen digit number was telling Michael that there was a way back to his father. According to the Suunto GPS capable watch he wore on his wrist, the coordinates were just over the mainland Chinese border, about fifteen miles east of the city of Shenzhen. That revelation had been enough for Michael to leave Kate behind and forge ahead.

Michael steeled his nerve as the train crawled toward the Chinese border at Lo Wu station. When the train's doors finally opened, he slung his backpack over his shoulder and continued onto the platform and down a crowded set of stairs into the bowels of passport control. Despite his well masked anxiety, neither he nor his passport attracted undue scrutiny, and after a slow but methodical pass through two congested immigration checkpoints, one to leave Hong Kong, and another to enter China proper, he found himself on a bridge, crossing a barbed wire enclosed drainage ditch toward the early morning lights of the city of Shenzhen, Hong Kong's nearest neighbor and arch rival.

Michael wasn't halfway across the pedestrian bridge before the automatic doors on the other side of it opened, revealing a shopping arcade filled with everything China had to offer. Electric dusts and neon competed for space with scooters and robots and gift-boxed chopsticks. As he strode through the arcade, the sheer mass of product threatening to overwhelm his senses, Michael kept his eyes on the second set of deeply tinted automatic doors at the far end of the corridor. Those doors were his goal.

The reason he was there. Five paces out, the deeply tinted panes slid smoothly open revealing the largest outdoor square that Michael had ever seen. It was then that it hit him. The border he had just crossed was much more than a simple line on a map. It was a line in the sand. A division between East and West, and as Michael contemplated that fact, he realized that here, alone in this vast square, far from home, the search for his father was about to truly begin. And so, Michael crossed not only his fingers, but the threshold of everything he had ever known, and entered the East.

Chapter 6

LI TUNG DIDN'T like to travel. If you were to ask him why, he would probably say that he was old now and preferred the comforts of home, but the truth was, he had never much liked it. It was a fact he had, out of necessity, gone many places in his youth, but now, in his golden years, his once thick black hair a mottled snow gray, Li preferred to stay close to the quiet home he had created for himself atop Hong Kong's Victoria Peak. He still had to go down the hill occasionally, if only to let his underlings know that he was still very much in charge, but he rarely ventured farther afield than Kowloon, and never beyond the borders of Hong Kong's Special Administrative Region. Life was, after all, short and he intended to employ what few years he had left, the way he liked, at home, in his garden, having the world come to him.

Today, however, was different. Li was preparing for, of all things, a trip. The very thought of it made him anxious, so anxious in fact that if there had been any other way, he would not have entertained the idea of going. But sometimes life's circumstances dictated even to powerful men like Li and in this case they dictated that he must leave the comfort of his home. As such, his items of a personal nature already packed by his loyal staff, Li made his way down the marble hallway of his elegant home toward his waiting limousine.

The car was a stretch S-Class Mercedes, the second of three he kept in his fleet, and much more suitable for a long journey than the damaged vehicle from the evening before. Many months of planning and negotiation had led up to this day, but as Li walked, his attention turned not to the details of what he was about to do, but to the reason he was about to do it — his only son. It was for his son, now a grown man in his own right, that Li was setting off on this journey today, and it was for his son that Li would do much more should the situation demand. He hoped that it would not come to that, but if it did, he would be ready. For the present, though, Li was pleased to see that his car was warm and waiting. He only hoped that the rest of his journey would go as planned.

Chapter 7

SHENZHEN SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONE, CHINA

THE BUS LOOKED normal enough. It was the ride that felt like something out of a sick video game. The madness was apparent even before Michael had stepped aboard. The bus didn't stop on the busy street, it simply slowed, disgorging its passengers as others ran breathlessly on. But getting on, Michael came to realize, wasn't the problem. The problem was staying there once he was aboard, because the driver, as near as he could tell, was insane. He drove with one pedal, the accelerator, seemingly believing that the mere presence of his giant battered vehicle was enough to scare anything and everything else out of his way. And in this case everything ran the gamut from three wheel tractors to trucks to water buffalo pulling motorless truck cabs to bicycles hauling loads twenty times their size.

The weirdness wasn't limited to the traffic. Shenzhen's downtown core safely behind them, wasn't long before Michael saw what appeared to be the Eiffel Tower poking its head out of a field. Moments later they passed under a near life-size replica of the Golden Gate Bridge, before motorizing past a pyramid, and then a whole swath of unfinished skyscrapers, soaring skyward, still covered in their flimsy bamboo scaffolding.

Michael didn't know if he was passing theme parks or office parks, but whatever the explanation he knew that he had only been to one other place remotely like it in his life, and it wasn't in China. It was in Nevada, Las Vegas to be precise, and as far as Michael could tell, China's glittering economic miracle of Shenzhen was like Las Vegas on speed. For a town that had been little more than a fishing village not many years before, it was hard not to marvel at how far the city had come. Where it was going, of course, was anybody's guess, but Michael had more pressing concerns. The bus was scheduled to pass his father's waypoint near the end of its route, and eyeing his GPS, Michael knew he was close. He raised his hand and, after some frantic waving, the bus driver cruised to a rolling stop alongside the highway.

After Michael fought his way forward through the packed aisle, the driver left him in a cloud of diesel and dust in what was a fair approximation of farmland. The ludicrous spires of development now far behind him, Michael continued up the highway a few paces before hitting a crossroads where a blacktop road wound up a grassy hill. This was not what Michael had expected of China. Kansas maybe, but not the busiest manufacturing center on the planet. And yet, here it was, a golden field with a lonely road winding through it like something right out of middle America. If not for the salt ocean air, Michael could have sworn he was in the heartland. He imagined that the sea breeze had to be blowing in from the Pearl River Estuary, which was represented by a wide bay on his wrist to LCD. Feeling that there might be another set of eyes watching, Michael scanned the periphery to see if he was being followed. Except for the trickle of traffic on the highway, however, the rolling hills appeared largely deserted. Hiking a few paces up the road, he found a hidden spot behind a knoll and took a quick moment to do some housekeeping.

Michael pulled his backpack off his shoulders and opened the drawstring to its main compartment. The pack itself was relatively low volume, small enough for him to always carry with him, yet big enough for the essentials. And though Michael had little experience with the Backpacker Circuit, he

had spent enough time traipsing through the Cascades to know what those essentials were. He carried a change of clothes: a fleece jersey and a pair of cargo pants, underwear and socks; nothing fancy but warm enough for a cool night. Next up was a space blanket, the kind with a reflective coating on one side designed to preserve body heat in emergency situations. Michael had spent the night under just such a blanket, caught on the north face of Mount Rainer in a blizzard, and as far as he was concerned, he would never go anywhere without one again. In fact, as he fished through his pack, he took the moment to slip the space blanket into the pocket of his cargo shorts. In the unlikely event that he got separated from his pack, it would be there.

With that thought, Michael instinctively felt for the Swiss Army knife he carried in his pocket. After getting off the plane, the first thing he had done was pull it from his backpack. In general, Michael felt better about items he could keep on his person and to that end, his GPS capable watch and a high resolution smartphone were a perfect complement to the trip. His cash and identification were further contained in a special pocket he had sewn to an inner panel of his shorts. As long as he kept his pants on, Michael reasoned, he'd remain in good stead.

Still, the reason he had the pack was that though you could try, you couldn't possibly carry everything you needed to travel for months on end in a single pair of cargo shorts. For that reason, the backpack also contained amongst other essentials: a Lonely Planet guidebook of the region, a Gore-Tex rain shell, a self-filtering canteen that made the dirtiest of water safe to drink, and a Petzl headlamp, all of which he pushed aside in his effort to find what he was looking for. After dropping the pack thirty feet to the concrete below the previous evening, he hoped they were still intact. Luckily, he had packed them within the folds of his down sleeping bag and with a final hook of the wrist he was able to extract what he was after — a compact pair of binoculars.

Michael had debated bringing the binoculars, but decided in the end that they were so lightweight they wouldn't hurt. At least not physically. But after all these years they still packed an emotional punch. Michael had been seventeen, staring through a pair of binoculars just like these ones, when it had happened. One minute he was a happy hiker and the next he was a hostage. It was without a doubt the single most horrific experience of his life.

Truthfully, the whole thing had started out great. His dad had invited him on one of his business trips. He was scoping out a new production facility for his company in Peru and Michael had jumped at the chance to go with him. Once they were done with business in Lima, they headed up to the Sacred Valley of the Incas near Machu Pichu. And that's when their little excursion went seriously off the rails. It was unclear whether the kidnappers had targeted them in Lima or not, but they knew what they were doing. They waited until Michael and his father were apart and they sprung. Michael had climbed a few hundred feet above to scope out the area with the binoculars while his father set up camp near the stream below. Michael was consumed by the lush mountain scenery, simply drinking it all in, when he felt a sharp tap on his shoulder. He was startled, but not scared. He figured it was just his dad. Even though Peru was home to hundreds of kidnappings a year, he had given little thought to the phenomena. Besides, Michael was seventeen. He was invincible.

Or so he thought. The first smack of the pistol dissuaded him of his invincibility pretty quickly and once the other two kidnappers trained their machine guns on him it was all downhill from there. Michael tried his best to act brave, to look brave, to be brave, but he was scared and it must have shown. His attackers asked him at gunpoint where his father was and when Michael refused to answer they pistol whipped him again. And that's when he got really frightened. Because, Michael thought, his father wasn't here, where was he? Did he even know what was happening?

The lead gunman, his coarse black hair tucked behind his ears, ripped the binoculars savagely from

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