

The Ghost in Hong Kong



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# The Ghost in Hong Kong

I was nervous about going back to Hong Kong—not because of the Communist China takeover, which had turned out to be almost a non-event, but because, even after seven years, I was not sure that I was not a wanted man in Hong Kong.

That last trip to Hong Kong back in '95 was the first time anyone had actually agreed to pay me expenses to come see them and write their story. I wasn't at all sure Inspector Robert Peng's expose of incompetence and corruption in the Hong Kong Police Force would top the best seller lists the way he seemed to think it would, but who cares? My motto is 'you want it, I'll write it'—as long as you pay my price.

The immigration officials at the Hong Kong airport didn't think much of the fact that I didn't know where I was staying in Hong Kong, but eventually let me through. Of course, I should have done what everyone else does and just plucked some hotel out of air and written that in. At least I'd had the presence of mind to describe myself as 'travel writer' rather than 'ghostwriter'.

About then, it occurred to me that I didn't know what the someone Peng had told me would meet me looked like. I guessed the person would recognise me from the photo I'd sent Peng. But no one showed any sign of recognition among the people waiting for passengers, and several people looked suspiciously at me looking questioningly at them. I moved to the small area set aside for smokers, lit up my pipe and waited, wondering what I'd do if no one turned up. I didn't know where I was supposed to be staying and didn't have a contact phone number of any sort.

I nearly swallowed my pipe when a very attractive young Chinese lady came up to me, put her hand on my arm and said, "Sorry I'm late. The taxi got caught in traffic."

She led me outside, told me to wait and dashed into the McDonald's, to appear minutes later with a large chips and a Coke, which she handed to me. I dumbly took them and watched as she hailed a cab.

We got in. She snuggled close to me and whispered in my ear to pretend we were old friends. I said how good it was to be in Hong Kong and to see her again. She said I must be very sleepy. I said I was, put my head on her breasts and pretended to sleep.

I was awakened by her body moving under me. "We're here," she said.

She opened the door and got out. I followed. I got my bag while she paid the driver. I looked at the apartment building we stood outside—not slummy but nothing fancy, though it probably cost a fortune to rent here in Hong Kong. Where? I asked myself

"Causeway Bay", she answered my unspoken question. "We have an apartment in here—what you call a safe house."

"We?"

"The Organised Crime and Triads unit."

"This is where I meet Inspector Peng?"

She shook her head. "No, this is where you stay."

"When do I meet Peng?"

She entered the code into the security device and the door opened. We crammed into a tiny elevator and she took me up fourteen floors and down a narrow corridor, past numerous small Buddhist shrines where incense sticks burned, to a very solid metal grille door blocking an equally solid wooden door. She produced separate keys for both and showed me into the apartment.

"Darling, it's so good you finally made it to Hong Kong," she said, put her arms around me and kissed me.

I had already spotted the tiny aperture of the camera and knew, with an inward sigh, that this was all play acting, but I returned her kiss fervently.

"Dump your bag and let's go see the town," she said.

I tossed my bag on the bed and followed her out, watching as she carefully made sure both doors were locked.

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We took a bus up town, walked, took ferries and walked again until she'd definitely lost me, if not whoever she thought might be tailing us. Finally, we walked through Victoria Park, still alive with people at this time, and on. Eventually, we passed a small building.

"Inspector Peng and I work here," she said. "Stay here."

She dashed off before I had a chance to follow her if I'd had a mind to. As I waited for her, it suddenly struck me that I didn't even know her name. If Chinese lovers were anything like those of the European tradition, they couldn't wait to say their lover's name. And neither of us had used the other's name in the hours we'd been together. Not very convincing play acting!

I seemed to be horribly conspicuous hanging around outside the headquarters of the organised crime unit and I walked slowly across and up and down the street, feeling equally conspicuous and extremely vulnerable. I was beginning to feel very uneasy about this job. Was all this cloak and dagger stuff just show? If not, it seemed that I could easily be in considerable danger.

Eventually, she reappeared, blinking as her eyes accustomed to the relative gloom. I let her walk down the steps and into the street before I stepped out of the shadows and joined her. I felt her tense and wondered if she were about to pull a gun in automatic reaction but she merely smiled, stepped close and kissed me.

"He's there but it isn't safe for you to see him," she said. "Tomorrow morning, get up early, go left out of the apartment building, then take the first left turn. Just up the street you'll see a newspaper seller. Buy a paper, then walk up to the next lane and turn left. Buy a Coke at the little shop a hundred yards along on the right. Keep going to the end of the lane. Just on the left of the street you come to you'll see a bench. Sit there, drink your Coke and read the paper. He'll meet you there."

I nodded. We started walking.

"What's your name?" I asked.

She looked at me in shocked surprise and laughed. "It's Gina," she said. "You mean I've never told you."

"Doesn't look good for lovers not to know each other's names, does it?"

"I know yours."

"I bet you do. Probably know what I had for breakfast."

She laughed again and then stopped suddenly, as though she'd suddenly thought of something. "Hungry?" she asked.

"Yeah."

She led me along the streets to the hole in the wall entrance to Jack in the Box. We climbed the stairs. For me at least, there were a surprising number of people still eating. We placed our order, took our food to a table and ate in silence. My head was bursting with questions but I was having trouble framing them. And I seemed to have fallen into the paranoid habit of looking for spies everywhere. It seemed most unlikely that anyone of any threat to us was already here and even more unlikely that the place was bugged and it was almost impossible for anyone to enter without being observed.

We finished our meal. She rested her hand on mine and held her face close to mine.

"You shouldn't have come," she said. "You've put yourself in great danger...or we've put you in great danger. The stuff Peng wants published is even more explosive than you think...and there are a lot of people who don't want it published...triads as well as police. To have the two most powerful forces in the country both after you is very, very dangerous."

"Peng must have known this. Why did he let me come?"

"He can be ruthless with people. Please remember that."

"If I ever get to talk to him."

"You'll see him tomorrow...Remember the instructions?"

"Yes."

She stretched. "Time for bed."

I wasn't sure in what sense she meant that. Something occurred to me.

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"Look," I said, "I'm quite happy having you as my long-lost girlfriend but this is my first trip to Hong Kong, as I'm sure anyone who might be tracking us would know. How did we meet and come to be romantically attached?"

"In Australia, of course. While I was doing my three-year course in forensics."

"You'd better fill me in on what we got up to."

"The usual things—movies, dances..."

"I don't dance," I cut in.

She shrugged. "Everyone dances these days. You do whatever you want and call it dancing. I'm sure you could do that with the best of them. Okay, leave that out. Restaurants, stage shows, swimming in the surf, seeing the koalas, driving in the country, staying over in my flat..."

"Which was where?"

"Saint Lucia."

"Figures... When was all this?"

"The last three years. I just returned to Hong Kong end of last year."

"Okay... I just hope no one asks."

"I've got a present for you," she said. She took out a large red dragon ring and slipped it on my finger. I never wear rings but it seemed ungracious not to accept it.

"Thanks. Very handsome. Make a good knuckle duster."

We walked back to the apartment. I unlocked and ushered her in. She did a quick, but pretty thorough, check and seemed satisfied nothing had been touched and no one had been in the apartment. She took my bag from the bed and placed it on the floor, then lay invitingly on the bed. I was shaken but not stirred. How far was she prepared to go to put on an act?

I took off my shoes and lay on the bed beside her, whispering in her ear, "Is this part of the act?"

She didn't answer, but rolled over on me and kissed me with considerable enthusiasm and passion. Much kissing and fondling and fumbling with buttons and zips and dragging clothes over protuberances later and we both lay naked on the bed, with her straddling me. If it was an act for the camera, we put on a damned good one.

When I woke that morning, Gina was gone. When she had left, I had no idea. I must have slept like a baby. I got up and showered. The shower was an abomination, continually varying between boiling and freezing despite my best attempts to regulate it. I was not in a good mood as I dressed and went down to follow Gina's instructions.

The guy at the desk smiled, nodded, said good morning and pressed the release button to let me out, but I noticed that he reached for the phone almost in the same movement. I told myself I was being paranoid, but I couldn't help wondering.

I turned left when I hit the footpath, then left again at the first intersection, bought the *South China Morning Post* at the newspaper seller, took the next left down a lane with a little shop on the right halfway down, where I bought a Coke, and on to a busy road. The bench was where Gina had said, just on the left, facing the road but with a view of the harbour just across the road. I sat down, stoked and lit my pipe, opened my Coke and prepared to read the news of Hong Kong.

I looked up to see a man, tall for a Chinese but round-shouldered and with one shoulder stooped lower than the other, walking towards me. He walked with a funny little sequence of steps that I decided was an extra little skip step of the right foot every third step. I decided that his right leg was shorter than his left and that was also why his right shoulder drooped. He dropped onto the bench beside me.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "Do you mind if I just have a quick look at something in the paper?"

I passed the paper across to him. He opened it out and flicked through it in an annoyingly clumsy way. But when he suddenly whipped something from his inside coat pocket, inserted it into the newspaper and handed the newspaper back to me, I realised the clumsiness was only a cover.

"No, sorry, it doesn't look like it's in there after all... You're a tourist, aren't you?"

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"Travel writer actually."

"Well, one thing you'll have to do is go to Aberdeen. Go on a harbour cruise. But don't go to the tourist trap ones. If you take the bus to the stop just beyond all the tourist trap ones, there'll be a sampan water taxi or two looking for a few extra dollars taking people on cruises. If you can, take the one that the old lady with two missing front teeth is touting for. You'll get good value."

"Thanks for the tip. Sounds like a good one to put in my article too."

He got up and left and I asked myself again if all this cloak and dagger stuff was really warranted. Even more to the point was the worrying thought that, if it was, we had probably both been fingered by now. I went back to the apartment and was disappointed to find still no sign of Gina.

I took the bus as instructed and got off at the right stop. The old crone with the gap in her smile was touting as Peng had said she would be. We agreed on a price and I hopped in the sampan. It took off on its harbour cruise, punctuated by numerous stops to hand packages to anchored boats or to receive packages from them. What was in the packages I have no idea. I guess it was all legal and legitimate but I wouldn't ask too many questions.

We'd done our tour of the harbour and were heading towards our departure point when the old man handed the controls over to the woman and came back to me, sitting in the stern.

"Tell Peng stay away headquarters," he said, then turned and went immediately back to the front of the boat.

We nudged into our landing point. As I was leaving he slipped me a card for one of the floating restaurants.

I wasn't sure if this was another message or just another bit of touting but it was lunchtime anyway so I made my way to the little pier from which the free boat to the Jumbo floating restaurant left.

As I walked into the restaurant, I looked around the room, looking for someone I recognised or someone who would recognise me and signal to me. I had been almost sure the card the old man on the boat had given me was a message and someone would meet me here but it looked like it may have just been a bit of touting after all. Might as well eat anyway.

I found a table, seated myself and partook of a reasonable meal of seafood, rice and Chinese vegetables, all the while thinking that someone would soon make contact. I finished the meal and still no one had. The waiter came to clear away.

"You had look at tanks where purify and hold seafood?" he asked.

Now that was an unusual thing for a waiter to ask. It must be another message.

"No, I haven't," I replied.

"You should."

"Thanks. I will."

Now I was really convinced it was a message. I found my way to the tanks. It was quite interesting how they ran fresh, pure water through the seafood to wash out the cholera vibrios and the hepatitis viruses.

I was picking my way carefully along the narrow path, wet with spray, beside the tanks when I was forcefully pushed very close to the edge of a tank.

"Don't look round," a voice very close to my ear ordered. "Admire fish. You could have fish biting toes not stop. Go back Australia, forget Peng. No more warning. Keep looking fish. Don't look round."

I gave him a good two minutes to get clear before I backed away from the tank and looked round. Who was he? I wondered. A corrupt cop? A triad heavy? Whichever, it seemed to be getting more and more unhealthy for me in Hong Kong. It also seemed pretty clear that the old man in the boat was a double agent.

I jumped on the first bus that came along. It was going to Central via Pok Fu Lam. I made my way to the top deck and took a seat up front, like a proper tourist. The bus staggered up and down hills and around curves on what seemed a very meandering course, completely

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disorienting me. I no longer had any idea which way Central lay. And then we were passing the incredible sight of the Chinese Christian cemetery, with thousands of tiny plots clinging to a steep hillside. For some reason, it triggered in me a deep reverie in which thoughts of life, the universe and everything floated through my mind.

I was still meditating when a very attractive young female seated herself next to me and put her brief case on the floor between us. I vaguely recalled seeing the Hong Kong University just before and decided she must be a student. But why, when there were still plenty of empty seats behind, had she decided to sit next to me?

"Are you English?" she asked.

"Australian." I admit I was somewhat taken aback. My choices had been between coincidence and yet another contact or even just someone who wanted to sit right up front and had enough confidence to sit next to a total stranger. But, what was this?

"Good enough," she said, smiling an impish smile at me. "You Australians speak a sort of English, don't you?"

"Better than a lot of English people." I was rather muffed, not quite sure if she was serious or teasing.

"I hope you don't mind. I like to practise my English whenever I get a chance."

"I thought the Hong Kong University conducted lectures in English?"

"It does." She seemed a little confused and I wondered if I hadn't caught her out in a lie. "But I still like to practise with native English speakers whenever I can. Very few Chinese ever manage to really master the English idiom."

"A hell of a lot more than English speakers who manage to really master Chinese...But you don't really sound like you need much practice."

"Thank you."

"Why is it so important, anyway? Hong Kong will be Chinese in a couple of years and surely Chinese will be all the go then."

"I want to do an international MBA or PhD when I finish my degree. That means I need to really speak English well."

"You do. For instance, you don't leave out articles and prepositions the way most Chinese speaking English do." In fact, I thought, your English is almost suspiciously perfect. "Where are you thinking of going?"

"I've narrowed it down to either doing a correspondence MBA from Edinburgh or going to Australia. You being so nice might have swung my mind to Australia." She flashed a dazzling smile at me and I knew I was being flattered but somehow it didn't matter.

The rest of the trip passed pleasantly. She told me about the village in China she originally came from and I told her about growing up in a country town in Australia. Somehow, it was funny and heart-warming and I felt in a completely different world far away from corruption and violence.

Then suddenly, when the bus had stopped and was about to move off again, she leapt to her feet, saying, "This is my stop", and dashed down the steps, onto the street and disappeared from view before I realised she had left her briefcase behind.

I didn't know what to do. The bus had moved off and, in any case, it seemed pointless to chase her. Perhaps I should get off at the next stop, retrace the route and see if I could spot her. Like looking for a needle in a haystack. I could get off, catch a bus back to Hong Kong University and leave it with their lost property or whatever; there must be something like that there. Then the thought came to me that maybe she had deliberately left it behind. Maybe she was a contact and maybe it contained a message or even some very secret material. I went to open it and then decided that maybe I should go somewhere where I could examine its contents unobserved. Where?

The bus reached Central at last and I got off, clutching the briefcase and still wondering what to do with it. Where was Gina? But did I really want her to know about the briefcase? Until I'd inspected its contents, I couldn't be sure. Same again, only more so, for Inspector Peng.

Almost automatically, I caught a bus to Victoria Park. I sat on a bench, smoked my pipe and tried to decide what to do. Then I remembered the warning I was to deliver to Peng.

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Should I push on and deliver it to him? But I'd been told not to go near his HQ, there was no guarantee he'd be there and, if he was, it might already be too late. In any case, I should do something about the briefcase first. I thought of going to the apartment and remembered the camera. Then a half recollection of a hotel near the apartment came to me. I'd see if I could get a room there.

I made my way to the Grand Pacific Hotel. I managed to get seven nights for the price of six. A lackey showed me to my room. It was kind of poky but adequate for my purposes. I waited till he had gone, shut and locked the door and put the briefcase on the bed. It was only then I discovered that it had a combination lock. Oh, well, only three tumblers with numbers zero to nine. That makes about a thousand combinations, I calculated (not that I really trusted my mathematics but, whatever, it didn't seem too horrendous). I started at 000 and worked my way through until I hit the jackpot at 201.

I was feeling a real anticipatory thrill as I finally flipped the lid open. First thing I spotted was a fairly thick file. I took it out and read 'Case Histories of Corruption in the Hong Kong Police Force and Government.' There were twelve what looked like very detailed case studies. I wondered if these were known and documented cases or if my student friend had been doing her own digging. Was there a tie-in with Inspector Peng?

There was another thickish file entitled 'Case Studies of the Triads in Present-Day Hong Kong'. This time there were ten apparently well documented case histories. Again I wondered if they were known cases or cases unearthed by the student or someone she could tap for information.

The distinction was, of course, important. If they were merely lecture notes or the result of library research, no one would be too bothered, though there would be those who didn't particularly like having the coals raked over. If they were the result of investigation of cases yet to come to light, they were dynamite—and potentially fatal to the bearer.

Why did she have them? Were they part of a course she was studying? Were they for her planned PhD? Did she deliberately give them to me? And, if so, why? If she wanted them brought to the attention of the authorities, there were better ways of doing so. Did she know I was a writer and think I could get them published? Was she connected with Inspector Peng? Or did she somehow know of my connection with Inspector Peng? How, in any case, had she known I was on that bus?

I tipped up the briefcase to see if it contained anything else. A small automatic and a couple of spare clips of ammunition tumbled out. I looked at it for a good many seconds before picking it up to examine it. It was small, about a .22 or the metric equivalent, I guess; not much good for other than very close range but could be deadly enough then. And it was fully loaded. Did she know she was in danger and carried the gun for protection? Or was it meant for me? It might be a good idea at that to have a gun for protection, but if I were picked up by the cops, they would certainly ask very awkward questions. For all I knew, it might have even been used to kill someone. I shoved everything back into the briefcase and looked for somewhere to put it away from prying eyes. Finally, I wrapped it in the doona and stuffed it back into the cupboard.

I went back to the apartment. As soon as I entered, I knew someone had been in it. I never wear aftershave—the perfumes or the solvents or something play hell with my sinuses. And there was a distinct smell of musky aftershave. Peng or whoever should train his agents more carefully.

I cautiously checked the bathroom to make sure no one was still there and hurriedly packed my bag. I was leaving, with a final rude gesture towards the camera, when I spotted the newspaper still lying on the bed. I stuffed it into my bag also.

I made my way back to the hotel, up to my room and unpacked my bag.

I dragged out the newspaper and looked for whatever Peng had stuffed inside. I was extremely disappointed—no great revelations, merely a bitch about how British officers in the Hong Kong police seemed to be unfairly preferred over Chinese. Hardly worth going through all the elaborate rigmarole for. Maybe it was a kind of dry run. Or maybe it was originally something else and someone had swapped over while it was in my room at the apartment.

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What now? I decided I might as well keep acting as a tourist—but an armed tourist. Maybe I could draw someone out.

I went out to the Western markets and bought a balancing boatman souvenir. If anyone was tailing me, they were doing an expert job of staying inconspicuous.

I took the long, long, long escalator to the Middle Levels—surely as tempting a target as I could arrange. A few times, I clutched the gun a bit tighter as impatient people walked up the escalator past me but absolutely nothing happened.

I took a cab back to Central and found my way to Prince's. Everything far too dear for me. Whatever happened to Hong Kong's cheap shopping? I followed my nose to a takeaway coffee kiosk and ordered a cappuccino. Then I looked at the girl serving me.

"I've got your briefcase," I said softly.

She frowned. "Just the cappuccino was it sir?"

"Thanks." I was sure she'd heard me.

She handed over the coffee and I handed over a note. She handed back some notes in change and a tailor's business card.

"Without," she said.

I looked at her blankly but she said nothing more and turned away to another customer. I decided it was something to do with the coffee and left.

I drank my coffee and took the train to Wan Chi. Why? Mainly because I had no reason to go there.

It was, therefore, an enormous surprise when I was about to emerge from the subway station into the street and Gina came towards me bearing two umbrellas.

"You'll need this," she said, passing one over to me. "It's pouring outside."

I didn't bother to ask her how she found me. I gave her the message about Peng. She looked at me briefly in stunned alarm and dashed off.

I decided to go visit the tailor on the card Elizabeth had given me. I agonised over whether to take Elizabeth's briefcase with me. Was that the message—that I should give the tailor her briefcase? I was reluctant to hand it over to anyone but her. And then I had the idea that her last cryptic word, "without", might have been telling me not to.

I took the subway to Kowloon and eventually found the street where the tailor had his shop. So did dozens of other tailors. Many of them stood at the entrance to their shops, promising better quality and cheaper price and all at dazzling speed.

I finally found the one I was after and climbed the stairs to his small shop. It had a large cutting bench, a small desk, a small change room and bolts of cloth taking up most of the rest of the space. A middle-aged Chinese man looked up from fussily cutting some cloth according to the chalk marks thereon.

"You want suit?" he asked.

"Just the pants. Never wear a coat. How the hell everyone here can get round in suits, I'm buggered if I know."

He looked at me.

"You Australian?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Travel writer?"

"Yes."

"Elizabeth sent you?"

"Yes."

"What she tell you?"

"Nothing."

"Not even I best tailor in town?"

"No."

"What colour?"

"Black."

He brought a roll of cloth and dumped it on the table for my approval.

"Okay," I said.

He took my measurements.

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"Double pockets?" he asked.

I looked at him blankly until I slowly realised what he was getting at—a normal pocket and another, with a very non-obvious opening, that fitted behind it.

"Sure. When?"

"Two day."

"I thought you Hong Kong tailors gave fast service."

"These pants special."

"Yes." I was thinking it would be nice to have them, with their pocket in which I could conceal the little automatic before then but "That's okay," I said. "I'll be busy... See you then."

"Elizabeth say meet her Brett's eat eight tonight."

"Who the hell's Brett?"

"Not who. Place eat."

"Restaurant?"

He nodded vigorously.

"Where is it?"

He shrugged. "Ask tourist bureau. I not know."

I went to leave then thought of something else. "Did she say if I should bring anything?"

"Not say."

I left him and made my way down the stairs and past the touting tailors. I spotted a bus that would take me to Victoria Park. I caught it.

I sat for a while in the park and puffed on my pipe while deciding what to do till it was time for the evening meal and whether I was supposed to take the briefcase with me this time. The first thing, of course, was to find out where Brett's was.

Then something sort of snapped inside me. I was getting sick of all the crap. I'd go see Inspector Peng, get whatever it was he had to give me and get the hell out of Hong Kong. If he was too scared to hand it to me, he could post it or scan it and e-mail it to me or just forget about it.

I strode off along the path through the park and on toward the headquarters of the Organised Crime and Triads Unit. There was a loud bang from that direction. I ran towards it. I was stopped dead by what I saw. Debris covered the road, the footpath, the steps and beyond. People I guessed were plainclothes police milled around the remains of a car. On the footpath, I could see two people desperately working on someone. I looked up further and saw Gina sitting on the steps, blood streaming all over her face. I fought my way to her through the gathering crowd and wiped the blood off her face. I could see no wound on her but I seemed to be fighting a losing battle. I looked in her scalp and found a gash about four inches long and a quarter inch deep. I closed it together as well as I could with my fingertips and pressed down hard. The bleeding slowed. I heard sirens coming closer and closer and prayed they were ambulances. Then someone was standing over me with a pressure bandage.

"That won't work," I said. "This better. But she needs stitches."

"I'm the doctor," said a laconic voice. "I'll decide what she needs."

But he was already irrigating the wound (as well as he could with my fingers in the way) with some solution (anaesthetic, clotting agent, antibiotic, or maybe all three; I really don't know). He put three or four rough stitches in her scalp. Gina barely winced.

"That will do her for now," he said. "You want to ride in the ambulance with her?"

"Sure."

They loaded her in the back and the doctor and I got in too.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Seems someone detonated a car bomb. I think the other guy was just going to get into the car when the driver jumped out and it went up. I think both of them copped it. I'm not sure about the guy in the car that was supposed to pick the driver up. I think he got away."

He bent over Gina and examined her wound.

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"It's really pretty superficial," he said, "but scalp wounds bleed like the blazes. You did a good job back there. Done first aid, have you?"

"Yeah, sort of."

"Army?"

"Sort of."

I didn't volunteer any more information and he stopped probing—or making conversation.

"We'll get her in there, stop the bleeding completely, stitch her up and she'll be right to go. But I think we'll have to keep her in for a while after that. She seems to be in profound shock but her breathing's okay, pulse and heartbeat are fine, she doesn't feel clammy. I think it's all a psychological post-trauma effect. Not surprising. She's had a close shave herself and seen two guys mown down in front of her. They're both definitely goners."

We arrived at the hospital and I was forgotten in the rush to get her to treatment. No point hanging around, I decided, but I enquired about Inspector Peng before I went and was told he'd been dead on arrival and had been taken to the morgue.

I finally found Brett's Seafood Restaurant.

"Dinkum Aussie tucker," Elizabeth said. "They fly in fish from Australia every day."

"How do they make any money?"

"I don't think they do. I don't think it will last very long. Though, it—and maybe the floating restaurants at Aberdeen—are probably the only seafood places in town where you can get seafood guaranteed not to give you cholera."

"Not the posh hotels?"

"Not the posh hotels."

Another invaluable hint for travellers for my article, I thought, as we went in, sat down and looked at the menu.

"It's also one of the few places we can talk."

"So, talk."

"You've read my case studies?"

"Your case studies? You mean you dug out the dirt yourself? They're not from the public record?"

"No."

"And they're current? Not from years back?"

"From now."

"And you're still alive?"

She stroked her hand quickly down my back. "Very much alive."

"What do you want me to do with it?"

"Take it to Australia. If I get there some day, I'll pick it up. If I don't, please get it published."

"I don't know that anyone in Australia would think it was a good enough story to publish. Not to Australians, I mean. We've heard enough stories to think that sort of thing is just the norm."

She sighed. "It is... What if you combined it with Inspector Peng's stuff?"

"Maybe if I ever got it, I could, but I didn't. How do you know about it, anyway?"

"I interviewed him once for a project."

"And he blabbed to you about it? No wonder he was blown to pieces."

"What?"

"His car exploded just as he was getting into it. Right outside his headquarters."

She sat stunned.

"So, you see you are in danger," I said.

"So are you."

"I can go back to Australia and forget about it."

"When are you going?"

I considered. "I'm not due to fly back for another week," I said. "But I'm not sure if it's worth hanging around. Perhaps Peng's assistant I've been dealing with might be able to

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find what Peng had to give me, but I wouldn't put the house on it. She was hurt in the explosion too and is badly shocked, so I don't know when I'll be able to get any sense out of her. Maybe I'll do some more touristy things and see if I can't at least get a decent article out of it and pay a bit of my expenses. I've got a two day visa for a trip to Guangzhou starting tomorrow."

She looked alarmed. "Guangzhou is not a place a foreign traveller goes to on their own. Why are you going?"

"To see the sights."

"It's too dangerous for you on your own. If you insist on going, I'm coming with you."

I considered. Would I really be any safer with her along? At least she could speak Cantonese—a definite advantage. Oh, why not? In any case, it didn't look like she'd take no for an answer.

Next morning, we met at the station.

"We're in the posh bit," Elizabeth said. "There's the train. Let's get aboard."

She guided me to our compartment and we got in and settled ourselves. The train pulled out and was soon passing through the dingy rows of apartment houses in Kowloon. Almost immediately, the vendors arrived selling drinks and eats, reminding me that I had missed my breakfast.

"Is that congee that guy's selling?" I asked Elizabeth.

"Yes. Want some?"

"Please."

When the vendor came near us, she got his attention and made the transaction. I ate the thick rice soup with relish.

Now we were moving through countryside, picturesque with peasants, pigs and ducks but punctuated with huge bridges that led from nowhere to nowhere.

"I guess they'll eventually build roads up to those bridges," I said.

"Yes...and more countryside will go."

I shrugged. "That's progress."

"And corruption."

"How?"

"Contracts... Will it ever stop?"

"Not as long as there's lots of money to be made."

Before long, the scenery became a blur and I closed my eyes and slept. I had had very little sleep the night before.

I woke up as we pulled into the station at Guangzhou, embarrassed to find my head on Elizabeth's shoulder.

"Sorry," I said. "You should have given me a dig."

"It's okay," she said. "Every female who could see us rather envied me, I think."

The station was rather dilapidated and rather scary, with police and soldiers much in evidence, several paddy wagons, even an armoured personnel carrier, and a big sign saying 'NO SPITTING. NO SHOOTING. NO CAMERA.'

We separated, Elizabeth going into the line for Hong Kong residents and me to fill in the requisite slip and get into the queue for foreigners.

The female immigration official looked quite intimidating, examining each passport in detail, then slapping it down on her desk as though it were her personal enemy, and finally stamping it with a force that suggested that passport would never dare cross her path again. But when I nervously presented my passport and slip, she gave me a big smile, used her stamp almost in a caressing action, and handed my passport back to me with another beaming smile.

I went through and saw a sign in English assuring tourists the government was doing everything to make their stay pleasant, even to now providing a straight-through lane for those with no goods to declare. I walked through it and joined Elizabeth.

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We hurried past the hordes of hustlers and beggars and mothers offering their pre-teen daughters. Elizabeth negotiated with the driver of a brown, rusty, falling apart minibus to take us to a hotel.

It was a mad trip. Cars, trucks, buses, motorbikes, motor scooters, bicycles all competed for road space. The only road rule more or less obeyed was to keep to the right. The most essential piece of equipment on the vehicle was obviously the horn. We contended right of way with buses, trucks and cars and somehow escaped destruction—even through one section where every driver had ninety percent of their attention focused on a huge television screen showing a soccer match.

We arrived at the Dong Fang Hotel.

"We stay here," Elizabeth said.

"You and me?"

"Yes."

I was rather taken aback. Maybe twin rooms or something, I thought. And this seemed to be a rather fancy establishment. Inside, it was even more so.

We went to reception and Elizabeth booked us in, though using my gold MasterCard. An employee took our gear and guided us through a courtyard so steamy it was like a sauna. On the walls were rows of photographs of successful trade missions conducted at the hotel—but no Australians. We went up a stairway, along a corridor and were shown into our room. It was quite opulent. I wondered how much this was costing me.

We stowed our gear, checked out the room, went out and found a restaurant nearby and had a meal of rice and noodles.

We went out and Elizabeth hailed a small private bus—a fifteen seater already holding about thirty people. Somehow, we crammed in and headed for the Zoo.

The Zoo was okay—a soundly sleeping panda, a rhino, camels, monkeys having great fun playing on a cable over a pool, etc.

We went into the shopping district and went to the shops looking at knickknacks. I bought a keyring and an abacus as souvenirs. We walked around the city, dodging bicycles screaming down the footpath ringing their bells, and saying "Hello" back to the Chinese children practising their one word of English.

As darkness began to fall, Elizabeth led me on a long and winding path through narrow streets with people cooking meals in open doorways. Was I walking into a trap? I could certainly easily disappear from sight here and no one be ever the wiser.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To my cousin's restaurant."

I was more than a little relieved when we came at last to the restaurant. Let's just say it would never have got a licence in Australia. It was only a few metres across the entrance and most of that was taken up with a space enclosed up to about waist height where a chef laboured. Baskets in front of it contained snakes for the diners. Past this, there was a row of tables on each wall, with barely enough room to walk through between them. Elizabeth's cousin ushered us to one of the tables and seated himself with us. There was a gas cylinder a couple of feet away from me but cousin lit up a cigarette so I lit up my pipe.

The meal was great. Don't ask me what we had. Course followed course and they were all different but all delicious. The only thing I have any clear recollection of is some sort of small, bony fish from which Elizabeth and her cousin seemed to suck seamlessly all vestiges of flesh without injuring themselves but at which I had to pick delicately and still managed to impale myself.

After I had visited the toilet—a short, open drain leading out through a hole in the wall to who knows where—Elizabeth and I somehow made it back to the hotel. We were about to make for our room when a hotel employee hurried up to us.

"Mr and Mrs Petersen, we change your room," he said. "You want double, we give you twin. So sorry about the mistake." He gave a little bow and took off with us following.

The new room looked very much like the old one but in the middle stood a double bed instead of the twin singles that had graced the other. We looked at each other. When he had gone, Elizabeth could not contain her giggles any longer.

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"Looks like we sleep together," she said. "I asked for a twin but they booked us in as Mr and Mrs Petersen and they must have decided we'd need a double."

"Unless there was a particular reason they wanted us to have this room."

"Such as?"

I didn't reply but started looking around the room for bugs. If there were any, they were well hidden. I ended my inspection with the bed. As I did so, I couldn't help burst out laughing. Elizabeth looked at me enquiringly.

"It's not a double bed," I said. "It's two singles pushed together. We could have done that ourselves."

We both lay on the bed and rolled toward each other. It was like rolling uphill and ending up half lying on an old-fashioned fence rail. Elizabeth giggled.

"It doesn't really matter," she said. "Nothing was going to happen. I'm menstruating."

I shrugged. "The story of my life: what looks like heaven turns into a bloody mess."

We breakfasted in the coffee lounge, walked for at least an hour until we came to a Buddhist temple. We climbed to the top, up an incredible number of flights of stone steps connecting each level. Even crouching, I banged my head each time we went through a doorway, which seemed to get smaller and smaller each flight up. By the time we made the top, I was almost on hands and knees. It was a magnificent view but all I could think of was going down all those steps again—and the fact that Elizabeth seemed to think my discomfiture was very funny.

From there, Elizabeth escorted me to another cousin's restaurant, where we lunched. It was much more up-market than the other one but somehow not as enjoyable.

We went on to a park with a substantial lake. There were pedal paddle boats for hire.

"Let's go for a paddle," Elizabeth said.

Despite the green and bubbling water of the lake, it was pleasant and a welcome relief from the heat. There were very few boats out, but as we went under a bridge and into an inlet, another boat cut right across our bows, span around and stopped dead abeam of us.

"Hoon," I said, and then saw that the occupant was pointing a gun at us.

I pushed Elizabeth down, spun the wheel and paddled as hard as I could towards the other boat. I hit it at full power—hardly more than walking pace but enough to tip the other boat and send the occupant pitching into the water. I back-peddled as fast as I could and headed away.

"Let's get the hell out of here," I said.

"I don't think he can swim."

I looked back to see the gunman's floundering attempts to get to the boat, which had skidded some distance away from him with the impact.

"Good," I said.

We paddled as quickly as possible to the spot where we were to return the boat, leapt out and made our way to the hotel as fast as we could. We gathered our belongings and checked out.

We were about to leave when a voice addressed me: "You're Australian?"

"Yes," I agreed.

"Doesn't Australia trade?"

"A lot, but not much with China. I see New Zealand fruit but no Australian. Sad."

"Anyone Australia want trade, come me." He handed me his business card.

"Thanks," I said, putting the card into my wallet. "Sorry, I've got to go."

"Goodbye."

We caught a cab to the station and hung around for our train, unable to get an earlier one. It was an anxious wait but we eventually boarded and returned to Hong Kong without incident—much to our relief and surprise.

We stopped off at the tailors and I collected my pants.

"Our group is walking across Lamma Island tomorrow," she said as we were parting. "You're welcome to come."

"I'll see."

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I took a bus into Central. Gina was waiting for me.

"You okay?" I asked. "You seemed to be at death's door when I left you at the hospital."

"I looked like I was at death's door and you left me?"

"I'd done all I could for you."

"So it *was* you who was the good samaritan. Thanks."

"So Peng is dead."

"Yes. I didn't get the message to him on time... whether it would have made any difference or not."

"Sorry," I said, feeling a bit guilty for not having delivered the boatman's message a bit sooner.

"Not your fault... So your job is over before it began. Did he give you anything?"

"No," I lied. Well, it wasn't much of a lie.

"Not when you met on the bench across the road from the harbour?"

"If you were watching—or one of your cronies was watching, you'd have seen him slip something into my newspaper. Peng would never have made a living as a magician. But if you'd seen that, you'd have read the stuff back in the apartment where I left it all day. And you'd know it was nothing but a bitch about how British officers were unfairly preferred to Chinese... Unless, of course, it was originally something more juicy and that was substituted."

"Who by?"

"You or the guy who left his aftershave stink in the apartment."

"Is that why you moved?"

"Yes."

There was silence between us for a while. I was pondering whether I should move again. She, and God only knew how many others, undoubtedly knew where I was by now. They'd probably even have the room bugged by now. But it seemed pointless. Wherever I moved they'd find me.

"How do you always know exactly where I am?" I asked. "You must have quite a team doing nothing but keeping tabs on me."

"You don't seem to realise just how much danger you're in."

"I do now." Whether Peng's demise had anything to do with my visit, I didn't know but it was certainly getting too close for comfort. "But why should they worry with me? I don't know anything."

"They don't know that."

"Who are they? I'll go and tell them myself."

She looked at me. "I believe you would. But I couldn't give you names even if I knew them to give you... Are we going to eat or what?"

"Where?"

"There's a Malaysian restaurant just up here."

If it had been anywhere else, it might have been okay. But I'm not particularly fond of Malaysian cuisine. At the moment, the mere mention of it turned my stomach and completely squelched my appetite. I told her so.

I saw her disappointed look and wondered if this was somewhere else I had to go for some obscure reason. A fuse went off inside me.

"Look," I said. "If I'm supposed to go in there and receive some secret message on a banana leaf, forget it. Just tell me here and now and cut the bullshit."

The tears in her eyes looked very real to me. "The only message was that I care... Go to hell then." She stormed off leaving me more perplexed than ever.

I caught up with her no more than fifty yards up the street. I could see that she was still sobbing. I waited until she had herself under control and then fell in beside her.

"Sorry," I said.

She said nothing.

"Look, I'm really not hungry. Why don't we go to the Night Market instead?"

She silently nodded. We went.

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It was a fascinating place and I bought a few knickknacks. Then we came to the fortune tellers—everything from I Ching to a bird that picked out your fortune for you. Gina stopped in front of an ancient Chinese man reading palms.

"Let's have our palms read," she said.

"I won't have a clue what he's saying."

"I'll tell you."

"Can I..." I bit back the rest (trust you) before I said it.

I sat down on one of the seats in front of the small table where the old man did his readings. He took my hand, looked at it intently, then rattled off something in Chinese.

"What did he say?" I asked.

"He said you've had many women but will now settle down and live a long, happy life with one."

"Okay. Now you."

She took her place and the man took her hand and scowled. It was some time before he finally spoke. Gina seemed startled.

"What did he say?"

"He said he could see only heartache and violence and sudden death."

"Good job all this is a load of rubbish," I said.

"Perhaps."

It wasn't.

The next morning, I got up and went to the bench where Peng had slipped me the notes. Why I did so I don't really know. Did I really expect a contact? I doubt it. But it came. A well-built Chinese man sat down beside me.

"I think you ready go back Australia now," he said.

"Four more days till my plane flight."

"I think you get earlier flight."

"Maybe."

He took out a wad of bills and started peeling off hundred dollar notes. "Just in case cost more."

"Forget it. I'm not that poor."

He put the wad back into his pocket. "Okay. Next flight?"

"I'll see."

"Okay."

He walked off but I knew he was waiting to see what I would do. He followed me into town and I made sure he didn't lose me and that he saw me go into Qantas. I confirmed my booking for the following Sunday. No way I was leaving yet. I was in Hong Kong and I was going to see the sights and turn a bit of profit out of it from travel articles. And I had a date with Elizabeth that very day.

I went out on to the street. I couldn't see him and guessed (hoped?) that he had thought I'd done what he 'suggested'. Nonetheless, I looked carefully for him as I made my way to the ferry to Lamma Island.

We landed on the opposite side of the island to the tourist traps, where I guessed the walk was to start from. It appeared I was right. There were groups of students (or, at least, they looked like students) hanging around, apparently waiting for late arrivals. I didn't know if I should mingle or not. Mingle probably wasn't the word; I, as a tall white of somewhat more mature years would never be able to mingle in with this lot.

The I saw Elizabeth...and Elizabeth saw me. She came over, grabbed my arm and thrust me into the group.

"My Australian friend, Phil," she said. "He's coming on the walk with us."

We set off. It was a reasonably testing walk but the track was good and it was very scenic between the mountains and the sea. Somehow, Elizabeth and I found ourselves bringing up the rear.

"So, what's this all about?" I asked. "Just a pleasant stroll or is there more to it than that?"

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"Such as?"

"Maybe a mob of rampant dissidents."

"We march from time to time to protest the worst human rights violations. Not that I expect it to do much good. I mainly use it for cover. I have a small group within the group that's doing our bit to try to get rid of crime and corruption. I guess it's probably as futile too. But those case histories might do something."

"I'll do what I can, I promise. If I can't find anyone to publish them, I'll put them up on a website... How long do I wait to see if you're coming to Australia to claim them?"

She considered. "If not next year, never."

"Okay. I'll give you exactly a year to contact me. Right?"

"Okay... Do you think the Chinese police will be after us?"

"I doubt if they'd think it was worth their while. Hopefully, they'll just decide it was an unfortunate accident."

"I'm beginning to wish I hadn't asked you to come today. You're in deep enough already. And this may not be the safest place to be."

"Where is? At least we've got a gang around us here. That should discourage anyone."

It suddenly occurred to me that there no longer was a gang around. We'd slipped further and further behind and were now a good hundred yards behind the rest. If anyone wanted to take a potshot at us, they had a perfect target.

"We'd better catch up to the others," I said.

She caught my drift immediately and increased her speed but we were cresting a hill and all the others were either down in the dip or over the brow of the next hill. I was very, very anxious.

I was right to be. There was a crack of a rifle and a bullet passed between us, missing both by inches. Maybe our would-be assassin couldn't decide which one to go for first and had ended up hitting neither. Or maybe he was a very good shot and just wanted to give us a warning. Or maybe he was just a lousy shot. I wasn't going to risk my life on any of those assumptions. I hit the ground rolling forward off the track and yelled to Elizabeth to do the same.

"Do what I do," I told her.

I shot up, quickly curled myself into a ball and hurled myself down the slope. I could hear Elizabeth following. We hit the bottom in a small stream. I jumped up and scrambled my way up the stream and under a little bridge. I could hear Elizabeth still following. I sat waiting for my breathing and heart rate to return to normal. I heard footsteps on the track and over the bridge. Friend or foe? I heard laughter and the sound of young voices.

"Stragglers from our group," Elizabeth said.

We scrambled up the slope and mingled into the group. There was much giggling and comments in Chinese I couldn't understand. We stayed close to the group for the remaining hour or so of the walk and I had no chance to talk to Elizabeth further.

Eventually, we came to the tourist strip. Students filled the Lamma Hilton, the Lamma Conrad, the Lamma Peninsula and assorted other cafes with less impressive names. It was a very pleasant setting. The restaurants were built out over the water, amid narrow piers to which small boats were tied up. We had a delectable meal of prawns, lobster, noodles, rice, etc, but no chance for conversation.

"Want to go look at the shops?" Elizabeth asked.

"Why not," I agreed.

We looked at the usual souvenirs filling the little shops opposite the row of restaurants, until we finally came to the end of the row.

She nodded. "When are you going back?"

"Sunday."

"Can't you make it sooner?"

"I'm going to get something out of this. I'm going to make like a real travel writer."

"You're a fool."

"Perhaps... Do you think he was shooting at you or at me? Or both?"

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"What does it matter? Whichever one, the other one is marked too now."

"I guess you're right. But if they killed me, they'd never know what Peng gave me or what I did with it."

"It wouldn't matter much if you were dead...unless you'd passed it on. But the most likely person for you to have passed it to would be me and then they sort of kill two birds with one stone...Anyway, it's time to catch the ferry back. Let's go."

"You go. I want to see who gets on the boat."

She looked very dubious.

"Be careful," she said. "You're my only chance... You're going to stay, aren't you?"

"You take care," I replied.

"You're crazy," she said. "They've already had one go here on this island so you're going to make yourself a sitting duck for them?"

"They're not going to shoot me here, are they?"

"Who knows what they'll do?...And don't forget you're the one who's got the case studies."

"Oh, and here I thought it was me you were concerned about."

She looked like she was trying to make up her mind whether to hit me or to cry.

"Sorry," I said. "You've got a point."

I reached into my pocket, took out the keys for my hotel room and handed them to her. She looked at them wonderingly.

"Get your stuff and drop the keys back into the desk. If I'm picked up by triad thugs or cops, I don't want them finding that. It could get both of us into deep trouble."

Reluctantly, she went. I watched as she joined a group of students and made her way to the ferry. I walked a bit further up the beach, looking at the boats. There was a particularly impressive black speedboat with very powerful engines. I could just imagine it tearing up the river into China in the dead of night. Something hard was thrust into my back.

"You want ride?" said a voice in my ear—a voice I recognised though I had never seen its owner's face. It was the guy who'd given me the warning at the floating restaurant in Aberdeen.

"Thanks, but I'll be right. I'm just going to catch the ferry."

"Get in," he said.

Awkwardly, I obeyed. There was another man in the boat. The man who'd ordered me into the boat barked something at him and he leapt to start the engines. The first man pushed me down into the bottom of the boat.

"Just lay still," he ordered.

I didn't move. I could feel the throb of the engines as we moved slowly and smoothly through the water. Gradually, we picked up speed. Where were they taking me? To a rendezvous with a superior or merely to dump me overboard when far enough out? I reasoned that, if they were going to kill me—whether by bullet or blunt instrument to the back of the head—I was giving them the perfect opportunity lying there. No way I was going to go down that meekly. On the other hand, if their plan, or their orders, were not to kill me, they wouldn't do so unless it were absolutely necessary to defend themselves or to stop me getting away—the latter being impossible anyway. So, I had nothing to lose by sitting up. I did so.

"I tell you lie still," snarled the guy who'd pushed me down.

"Get stuffed."

Like all good sailors, he was barefoot so, instead of a straightforward boot, he had to attempt a karate kick with the side of the foot. It is very difficult to karate kick a sitting person and it was easy for me to grab his foot and toss him back. He landed with a thud on his back and I had the little automatic out of my secret pocket before he could recover. The man at the wheel turned round. He had a pistol in his hand. I fired twice and two neat holes appeared in the middle of his forehead. He dropped, no longer interested in proceedings.

I killed the engines and swung back to face my would-be assailant, who was struggling to get up. Thank God, his head must have hit something pretty solid when he fell. He still looked dazed.

"Who sent you?" I demanded.

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He looked blankly at me.

"I know you speak English," I shouted, "so don't play dumb? Who sent you?"

Instead of replying, he sprang at me. I got off a shot but it only went through his shoulder. Not enough to stop him. But I managed to bring my knee up and connect with his sensitive parts. He went down in agony. I shot him once through the temple. Okay, so it was cold-blooded and stupid—now I'd have no chance of getting anything out of him or anyone else—but even in his present state he was as dangerous as a wounded bull.

I threw the bodies and the gun overboard, started the engines and headed in what I hoped was the general direction of Lamma Island. It wasn't. After some time, I caught up with ever-increasing traffic and saw an entrance to a harbour I recognised as Aberdeen. All the better.

As I nosed into the harbour, a sampan water taxi headed out towards me. Incredulously, I recognised the old guy who had given me the warning for Inspector Peng. So, it looked like he did have dealings with the baddies. I eased off the throttles and let him draw near and then slammed down the throttles and slewed the boat round the give his boat the full blast of my wash. It was swamped and toppled in seconds. I didn't look back but throttled back to a reasonable speed and beached the boat at the nearest convenient spot—ironically, the ramp from which I'd taken the harbour cruise. I got out and ran to catch the bus just filling with passengers a hundred metres away. As I got on, I saw the telephone box nearby and knew how Elizabeth had known which bus I was on.

It was one of the scariest rides of my life. The driver obviously felt he was destined for the racetrack and drove at maximum speed through narrow streets where there was barely room for the bus let alone other vehicles, and took corners in a death-defying fashion, so that the windscreen of the bus almost scraped the buildings on the other side. But the tension was somehow good as an antidote for the deeper tensions.

From Central, I took the subway to Causeway Bay and walked to the hotel. I went to the reception desk and asked for the keys to room 1411.

"Ah, yes, the young lady left them," the clerk told me with a smirk.

I went up to the room. As expected, all trace of Elizabeth had gone. I made a frantic phone call to Qantas and was able to get on the night flight. I packed and checked out. I wasn't going to press the point, but the clerk agreed to only charge me for the used nights.

I caught a cab to the airport and, much to my relief, caught the plane without incident. I even succeeded in getting a seat with more leg room.

This time, things would be different. I'd pre-booked my hotel, so knew where I was staying. And this was a far safer assignment. All I had to do was interview a young Australian guy about the computer consulting business he'd set up in Hong Kong, maybe take a few photos and put it all into an 800 word article for Austrade to put into their promotional material. The idea was to give Australian businesses the clue that it was profitable to export services overseas, as well as goods. This was despite the fact that none of the profits of this particular business went back to Australia. Also, the fact that they'd had nothing to do with his success seemed irrelevant. He'd been made redundant at IBM back when they were in deep trouble, got a good payout and gone to Hong Kong, got a Chinese partner and started the business. Apparently, it was doing very well—even better since the Asian Crisis, since many of his overseas competitors had pulled out.

This time *was* different. For a start, we landed at the brand new airport. I missed the adventure that landing at the old airport had been—dropping in so close to high rise buildings I swear you could see what the occupants were doing inside, then landing on a strip mere metres from the sea in three directions. Now we merely landed at an airport that could have been just about any major airport in the world.

This time, too, I was all prepared with my immigration slip. I was staying at the Grand Pacific Hotel (again) and I was a Trade Official (I did manage to get an ID card out of Austrade in case anyone queried this). And this time there would be no one to meet me.

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I managed to grab a cab and get the driver to understand I wanted him to take me to the hotel on the card I showed him and not to the one he was getting a commission from. It seemed a much longer trip than last time but then last time I'd slept most of the way with my head cradled in Gina's gorgeous breasts. I wondered what had happened to Gina. Was she still chasing baddies? Or had they got her too? Or was she at home looking after a tribe of kids? Or just doing some other job?

We arrived at the hotel. I paid the fare, booked in and was shown up to my room. It was a larger room than last time—a double. Austrade was paying me five star rates and I was staying in a three star hotel and making money on the deal, so why not splurge a little? There was the usual bar fridge, not as well stocked as fancier places but I never used their offerings, buying my own elsewhere at half the price and just using the fridge for storage. There was a jug to boil water (an absolute essential in Hong Kong), a toilet (which I used and then had to spend ten minutes adjusting to stop the continual flow of water), a shower which seemed to work well enough, the usual clothes storage space, a bed and a TV slung so that you could watch it in bed and repeatedly hit your head on it whenever you tried to navigate in the vicinity of the bed (at least, if you were six foot five like me). And it was air-conditioned.

I had a shower, unpacked my clothes and put my travelling alarm on the bedside table next to the phone. I sat on the bed, thinking what I would do. Somehow, though I was incredibly tired, I didn't feel like going to bed yet. I decided to see what sort of a view I had and pulled back the curtains. I quickly sat back down on the bed, completely overpowered. The curtains had covered a huge window, filling the entire wall space and, through it, I could see not only the streets and rooftops below but the harbour, with dozens of ships and boats laying at anchor or going about their business. That's it, I told myself, I'll go for a ride on the ferries. If there's one thing I love about Hong Kong, it's the harbour...and, I told myself ruefully, it would kind of be reliving the first night of my last trip. I had one last look at the harbour, then a glance at the rooftops below. I thought I saw a man with a rifle standing there. I blinked and he was gone. Must be getting paranoid, I told myself.

I dressed and went to the elevator. A very smartly dressed youngish Chinese lady already occupied it. I smiled and she smiled back. She asked me where I came from. I told her and asked her where she lived. She told me Shanghai and that she worked for the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank there. I asked her if she were in Hong Kong for business or pleasure and she said both. She asked where I was going. I told her for a ferry ride. She said that sounded good and did I mind if she came along for the ride, as it were. I said I'd be delighted.

We took a cab to the ferry terminal.

"Which ferry?" she asked.

"The first one to come along."

We took the ferry to Tsin Sha Tsuen. From time to time, we commented to each other on various sights but mainly we just watched the harbour life in companionable silence. The ferry docked and we strolled along the waterfront, entranced by the reflections on the water (well, at least I was; who can know what someone else is thinking?). The thought came to me that the companionable silence might be becoming just a bit boring to her.

"What's your business in Hong Kong?" I asked. It was the first thing I thought of and I kicked myself as soon as I asked the question.

She looked at me quizzically and I wondered if I hadn't overstepped the mark.

"But why should you be telling a total stranger your business," I apologised. "If it's top secret wheeling dealing, forget I asked."

She laughed. "No, just that I really can't imagine you being interested. Bankers are even more boring than accountants when it comes to talking about work."

"And I wouldn't understand it anyway?" I asked.

She looked at me. "I don't know. What do you do?"

"At the moment, I'm a trade official."

I don't know why I said it in just that way. It was a blunder...and one she quickly picked up on.

"At the moment? You do a lot of different things?"

"Mainly I write."

## The Ghost in Hong Kong

She raised her eyebrows. "What do you write?"

"All sorts of things. You want it written, I'll write it... for a fee, of course. The main purpose of this visit is to write an article about an Australian guy who set up a computer consultancy company in partnership with a Chinese lady and is apparently doing well."

"That's interesting. My business in Hong Kong is to find out why roundings always seem to operate in one direction and then to quietly disappear from the books since we had some new software put in... strangely enough, by a company whose principals are a young Australian bloke and a young Chinese lady."

"Could be just a software blip."

"Could be," she agreed, but I could tell she didn't really think this was likely. "Or sheer incompetence. Or fraud. Whichever way, it doesn't look good for them. And if this is the same company you're supposed to be writing the article about, I'd say forget it. What did you say the name of the company was?"

"I didn't." If it was the company I was supposed to be doing the piece on, I saw my duty as warning them, not dubbing them in. "Let's go back," I said. "I'm ready for bed."

She laughed. "I bet you are... after your long flight, I mean."

We walked back toward the ferry terminal. I was deep in thought about what she had told me of the funny business with the new software at the bank. I'd have to get on to Adam as soon as I got back to the hotel and warn him—if indeed it was his firm that was involved.

I was jolted out of my reverie by the sight of a figure I thought I recognised cutting away from our path. In a moment, he had faded into the shadows and I cursed myself for imagining things. Inspector Peng was dead and had been dead for years. And yet, the way he held his shoulders and the way he put in a little extra skip step with his right foot every three paces to compensate for the fact that his right foot was shorter than his left... Sheer coincidence, I assured myself.

My companion had picked up my startled hesitation.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I just realised I don't know your name," I said.

She laughed. "I thought this was a no names date. Lan Lee." She held out her hand in mock greeting.

I took her hand and held it. "Phil Petersen," I said and looked into her eyes. There was no hint of recognition. Did that mean she hadn't heard it before or that she knew it so well it was now familiar?

We caught the ferry to Chai Wu and the tram from there to Causeway Bay.

"I need some milk for my breakfast," I said as we boarded the tram.

She wrinkled her nose in disgust and I gathered that, like many Chinese, she couldn't tolerate milk. But she guided me to a 711, I bought the milk and we went back to the hotel. The elevator stopped at my floor.

"Thanks for a lovely evening," she said and brushed my cheek with her lips.

I thought about inviting her in but decided against it. I had to get on to Adam and see if he was involved in the bank job and warn him if he was. I went to my room, switched on the light, found his mobile phone number and called him, looking at the time as I did so. 12.30. He wouldn't be too pleased being called this time of night. Tough!

He wasn't. "Adam Clay," an irritated, sleepy voice answered. It was obvious I'd woken him.

"Phil Petersen," I said.

"I didn't expect to hear from you till Monday," he grumbled. "What's the rush?"

"Did you install the new software for HKSBC?"

"Yeah."

"Well, you could be in trouble. They've brought an investigator down from Shanghai to look into something about how roundings always seem to go in one direction and to disappear. Know what I'm talking about?"

"I think so... but I can't see how that could happen with the software we installed. Must be a software glitch. I'll have to look into it."

He didn't seem at all perturbed and I doubted he was working anything fishy.

# The Ghost in Hong Kong

"Did you do the job yourself?" I asked.

"Elizabeth did it. She does most of the big jobs like this. Or the lads do under her direction. But I think she did all the banks personally."

"She couldn't have done anything wrong?"

"No way. She's extremely competent, the brains of the outfit. I mainly just chase the business."

"My information is they suspect fraud."

"Again, no way. She's as honest as they come. And if she's creaming off money from the banks, she sure isn't spending it. She's not one of your money's everything Chinese. We do okay and she's not short of a bob but most of her spare cash goes to her charities—schools and orphanages here and in China."

Could be a bit of a Robin Hood act, I thought to myself but didn't say it.

"Look," he said. "I've had about five hours sleep in the last three days working on a contract and I'm bugged. I'll drop round your hotel early tomorrow and we'll talk about it. Okay."

I agreed and he hung up. Sleep, I told myself. I moved to shut the curtain across the window, allowing myself just one more glance at the magnificent view. I flicked my gaze to the rooftops below. This time I was certain there was a man with a rifle on top of one and he seemed to be aiming straight at me. I hit the floor, which was pretty hard to do when the distance between the bed and the window was less than the distance across my shoulders. There was no shot, no sound of breaking glass. Had I reacted too quickly or had I been imagining things? I sure wasn't going to have a check peep. From the prone position, I edged the curtains across the window. I guessed he could still fire blind but I figured that was unlikely. I dressed in my pyjamas, turned off the light, lay on the bed and prepared to sleep. Not surprisingly, sleep wouldn't come; I had a lot to think about.

What was, perhaps, surprising was that the thing I thought most about was seeing the man who reminded me of Inspector Peng.

The phone rang. I picked it up and answered it wearily "Hello."

"Toilet ground floor Mandarin tomorrow."

"What?" and then I recognised the voice.

"Peng?"

"Just call me Charlie. Talk tomorrow."

I lay back on the bed and tried again to go to sleep. My mind raced and the bed seemed made of concrete. In desperation, I laid the doona on the bed, laid myself on it and went instantly to sleep.

I was having breakfast of my special muesli when Adam arrived. He declined my offer to join me. He looked very worried—as he had a perfect right to be.

"Have you got in touch with Elizabeth?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "She's off doing something with her orphans or something. Won't be back till this afternoon some time."

"In that case, we'll just have to play the tourist until she gets back. Aberdeen it is—for starters."

"We haven't got time for sightseeing," he protested. "We... I have to do something about this mess."

"We," I said. "I'm not going to leave a fellow Aussie in the lurch in a strange country."

He looked at me dubiously. "Thanks, but what can *you* do."

"You might be surprised."

"How can I just swan around like a tourist when my whole world is about to crash? I've got to go into work and see what I can find."

"If there's anything incriminating, Elizabeth will know what and where. If not, it doesn't matter. You can't get into the bank today; it's Sunday, remember. If you go tearing around like a blue-arsed fly in a bottle, they'll certainly get suspicious. Relax, enjoy a nice cruise on the harbour and look confident."

# The Ghost in Hong Kong

"Easy for you to say."

"Yes." Not always easy to do, I added to myself.

Adam and I took a cab to Aberdeen. It was crowded with tourists from China. We went on a harbour cruise in one of the officially sanctioned boats, expertly driven by an elderly Chinese lady. I saw no sign of the sampan water taxi I had swamped—but then I may well not have recognised it if I had. I wondered what sort of death wish brought me here where it was all too possible that someone would recognise me. I certainly wasn't going to tie up any loose ends here. We came back to our departure point.

"Where to now?" Adam asked.

"Bus to Central via Pok Fu Lam."

"Why?"

"Because I want to."

He shrugged. "Okay."

We got aboard the bus. I swear it was the same one I'd ridden along this route seven years before—even though a new company now owned it. It was old, slow and wonky, creaked and groaned, lurched round corners and barely made it up hills and it brought back memories of Elizabeth—not this new Elizabeth, Adam's partner, but the student Elizabeth. I wondered what had happened to her and if she'd ever got her case studies published. Was that really why I took this trip—to see Elizabeth again? Did I think she was going to get on this bus again?

"Where to now?" Adam asked when we got off the bus in Central.

"Walk round town as though we haven't a care in the world."

We walked round town and lunched at Oliver's.

We walked on and I steered my companion in the direction of the Mandarin Hotel.

"I'm going to dash in here for a piss," I said.

"Why here?"

"Because I want to say I've utilised the facilities at the Mandarin. Coming?"

"I'm in enough trouble without getting tossed out of a posh hotel. I'll wait here."

I went in and found the toilets. There was a big sign GUESTS ONLY on the door. I ignored it and went in. It seemed empty except for an old Chinese man waiting for his tip for performing the inestimable service of turning the tap on for you when you washed your hands. I used the urinal and walked over to the taps and waited for him to perform. As I did so, I saw his face. It was like seeing a dead man walking. There were scars there that had not been there before and a blind socket where an eye had been but I was convinced it was the face that was imprinted on my memory forever even though I had seen it but once before.

"Inspector Peng," I said.

He shook his head. "Charlie. Don't ask questions. Go Dymock's. Show girl your red dragon ring. She tell you book ordered Lin Pao come in. You tell her seven years been trying to find. She give you. You find very interesting."

I went out, worrying over the fact that, if I could recognise Peng, so could others.

Adam was waiting.

"There's a Dymock's somewhere around here, isn't there? Let's go there. I want to see if they have a book I was looking for."

Reluctantly, he guided me to the bookshop. We browsed around. A girl came up to me and asked if she could help. I flashed the red dragon ring at her but it obviously meant nothing to her. I saw another girl at the counter. I went up to her and placed my hand on the counter, the red dragon ring almost shouting at her. She looked up at me and seemed to size me up.

"Book by Lin Pao you ordered come in," she said.

"Great. I've been hunting that book for seven years."

She dashed out the back and returned with what looked like a huge book already wrapped in brown paper. She put it into a carry bag.

"One hundred twenty dollar," she said.

# The Ghost in Hong Kong

What was that—about thirty bucks Australian; cheap for a work that big. I handed over the money.

We went out. Adam's mobile rang. He answered.

"Elizabeth," he whispered to me.

"Tell her to meet us at the Lamma Island ferry terminal in two hours."

He did so.

"What are we doing for two hours?" he asked.

"I'm going back to my hotel. I don't want to lug this around everywhere. You can come or you can amuse yourself."

"I think I'll go to my office."

"I told you there's nothing you can do there... Maybe there is. Print me out a copy of your current balance sheet and profit and loss statement for the last twelve months."

He looked at me, completely perplexed and more than a little annoyed, but he resignedly shrugged his shoulders and sighed. "Okay. I guess this will all make sense sometime."

We parted and I took the subway to Causeway Bay and walked to the hotel. I went straight up to my room and settled myself to see what the 'book by Lin Pao' was all about.

As I suspected, it was a few hundred sheets of manuscript rather than a book. I glanced at several pages at random. Oh, God, this looked like the material I was supposed to get seven years ago! But, who'd give a damn about it now? Then I realised it was a continuous record right up to the present. What I'd been nonchalantly carrying around all day was sheer dynamite.

But, what was I supposed to do with it? There was no way I'd get it published in Hong Kong and who outside China cared? If I knew an honest cop, I could give it to them. Was I the chosen disciple selected to take his message to the world? Again I told myself, nobody outside China cares; probably not too many inside China either. I found myself wishing someone would come looking for it and take it off my hands and out of my life.

Sighing, I sat down to read it more carefully and suddenly things fell into place. I became so engrossed I almost forgot my appointment with Adam and Elizabeth.

"Elizabeth!" I said when we met her.

"Phil!" she said.

Adam looked bewildered. "You two know each other."

"We've met," I said.

We went to Lamma Island, going straight to the touristy end of the island. There was a lot of conversation between Adam and Elizabeth but I stayed clear of it—surprising and rather annoying both of them, I gathered.

Nothing much seemed to have changed as we walked past the row of shops on one side and restaurants on the other and along the beach. Then we started on the track up the hill and I saw all the rough shacks that had been built a little way off the track. Like Bribe Island in the old days, I thought. Adam said he'd had enough. Elizabeth and I went up the top of the first hill and stopped.

"That was quite a day," I said. I gave her a brief account of what had happened after she left me.

"You were stupid," she replied

"Yes...but not as stupid as you if you've done what the lady from the HSBC suspects you've done."

"It was for a good cause."

"Your orphans and schools?"

She nodded. "If you saw them, you'd know why."

"Perhaps. But that won't stop you going to jail. Or having a bullet through your head if the mainland Chinese cops get their hands on you...And think what this will do to Adam."

She paled. "What can I do?"

"Leave it to me," I said, with a confidence I didn't feel.

We walked back down the hill.

## The Ghost in Hong Kong

"So, you didn't make it to Australia," I said.

"No. I ended up doing the external MBA course from Edinburgh University."

"What did you do with your case studies?"

"Nothing."

"Does your group still exist?"

"No. Everyone got to where they felt they were just bashing their heads against a brick wall and no one cared. Maybe we just grew up."

"Maybe...How would you feel about going to Australia and doing a PhD?"

"Okay, but..."

"No buts. I could arrange it. Only one snag—you couldn't come back to Hong Kong."

"They'd send me back."

"I could make sure you got permanent residency and eventually Australian citizenship...It would be pretty obvious that it wouldn't be safe for you to go back to Hong Kong."

"They wouldn't give me refugee status just because I'm a criminal."

"But they would if you exposed criminals."

"Even then, they wouldn't if I could be shown to be a criminal."

"Leave that to me."

"What about my orphans and schools? They need me."

Oh God, bleeding hearts, I thought. Here's a woman facing jail or worse and she's worried about her orphans and schools.

"I can work on that," I said. "Think about it."

We joined Adam and walked back to the restaurants. Outside one of them an attractive young lady was touting for business. She promised us the finest food, the best service and even a free beer if we graced her establishment. I told her I couldn't drink beer.

"For you, sir, brandy," she said.

I laughed. "Sold," I said and she showed us to a table next to the water.

It was an excellent meal, with prawns, lobster, noodles and vegetables, my glass of brandy and beer for the other two.

"So, what do we do?" Adam asked.

"Well, I'm no accounting or computing genius, but can't you set up a suspense account and make it look like the bits Elizabeth creamed off went into it?"

They both considered.

"Yes, but the previous dealings would still be traceable," Adam objected.

I thought for a moment.

"Elizabeth, explain to me exactly how this scheme of yours worked," I said.

She started to tell me but soon got herself tangled and me utterly confused.

"I need paper," she said.

I produced the small notebook and pen I always carry with me from my pocket. She started again, drawing neat flow charts to explain herself. It gradually became clear. It was simple but ingenious.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," I said, "as I said, I'm no computer whiz, but couldn't you make this" (pointing to a bit of the diagram) "into an endless loop if anyone tried to enquire. I know it wouldn't keep them out for ever but a few days is all you'd need."

"Long enough for us to get out of Hong Kong?" Adam queried. "But what about your banker friend? This is going to take us all night to figure out and tomorrow at least to put into practice. She's not going to be just sitting around twiddling her thumbs."

"Leave her to me." I had another thought. "Wouldn't it be fairly easy to adapt this to a system that just hid accounts?"

The both looked at me and at the diagram.

"I suppose," said Adam.

"Yes," said Elizabeth, "but..."

"More buts than a billy goat," I said, laughing. "Don't worry, if you can do your part, I'll make it work."

I turned to Adam. "You got those print-outs I asked you to do?"

## The Ghost in Hong Kong

He handed them over and I perused them. "Not bad. What would you say your company is worth?"

"After this, probably nothing," Adam said sourly.

"Without this?"

"We turned down an offer of ten million plus scrip a couple years ago. Just as well, the scrip became practically worthless. Even with the recession, it would have to be worth double that now."

"Hong Kong dollars?"

"US dollars."

"Not bad... What did you start with?"

"Pretty well zero."

"Well done... Debts?"

"Only wages."

"So, if I got you around twenty million US, you'd be quite prepared to sell?"

"At this moment, if I knew I could get out of Hong Kong with a million US and no comebacks, I'd be delirious. But no amount of money would be any good to me in jail."

"And you Elizabeth?"

She looked troubled.

"Would this mean leaving Hong Kong and going to Australia?"

"Yes."

"What about my orphans and schools?"

"I told you I'd work on it."

She didn't seem totally convinced. Finally, "I don't want to go to jail," she said.

We caught a small ferry to Aberdeen. I stood far enough away from the other two that they could discuss my proposition between them without fear of being overheard. After some time, they joined me at the rail, one on each side.

"Okay," Adam said. "We'll do it your way. What do you want us to do?"

"You'll have tomorrow to get the suspense account set up and your tracks hidden. If you can do that neatly so there'll be no comeback, everything's fine. If you have to use the loop to hide things, get to work on the method of hiding secret accounts. If you can't get either done, get the first plane out of Hong Kong."

"I can't just leave Hong Kong," Elizabeth objected.

"I can fix that," I assured her. I already had a contact in the Australian embassy and, thanks to Peng's documents, knew who I could bribe on the Chinese side.

I left them to stew on it a bit more.

At Aberdeen, we caught a bus to Central. Conversation was impossible, even if we'd been so inclined. The driver was either the same frustrated racing driver as we'd had last time I took this bus or his cousin. I took my leave of Adam and Elizabeth there. They were both still obviously very anxious and dubious.

"I'll ring you tomorrow night to see how you've got on," I told Adam.

I walked to my hotel and enquired at the desk for Lan Lee. The clerk dialled a number and apparently received an answer.

"Who shall I say is enquiring?" he asked me.

"Phil Petersen."

He spoke an Anglo-Chinese version of my name into the phone. It must have been recognisable for he hung up and told me, "The lady would like you to go up to room 1606."

I thanked him and went. I found room 1606 and knocked on the door. She opened it, wearing her usual slightly supercilious smile. She was smartly dressed, as though she had just come in or was about to go out.

"Well, Mr Petersen. What can I do for you? I thought you'd be out with your friends."

## The Ghost in Hong Kong

"Just got back. It *was* the company you're investigating but I think you'll find they've done nothing wrong... What I really came to see you for was to suggest you might like to take the day off tomorrow and go see the sights."

She laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks.

"To give your friends time to clean up and cover their tracks," she finally managed to say. "Why would I do that?"

"I'm sure the HKSBC would be much happier with an innocent explanation than an admission of a breach in their systems and a messy police investigation."

She stopped laughing and considered this.

"Of course, those who had failed to notice the money had merely been transferred into a suspense account would look complete dunderheads and probably be transferred to Mongolia but..." I let her imagination fill in possible steps up the ladder for her.

She pondered for some time, then suddenly smiled.

"I'm still not persuaded," she said. "Persuade me."

It was quite late when I left her to go to my room, exhausted but convinced I had persuaded her and with an arrangement to meet her at Admiralty at ten the following morning.

The next morning, I was first in the queue for visas for travel to Guangzhou as soon as it formed. The official looked at my passport and my completed form.

"Australia," he observed, drawing out each syllable.

"Yes."

"Not possible go Guangzhou tomorrow. Take two day."

I looked at the nameplate. If Peng was right, luck was with me.

"I heard it was possible to expedite things for an extra fee." I put a hundred dollar note on the counter.

"Perhaps can be done." He pocketed the note, tore out a page from a book of printed forms, filled in the details, stamped my visa and handed it to me.

I caught a cab to Admiralty and found Lan Le. We caught a bus to Ocean Park and went up on the cable car. The view was magnificent but I felt extremely vulnerable and had the uncomfortable suspicion we were making ourselves targets. The feeling was heightened when I saw people on a steep path that more or less paralleled the cableway.

We reached the top. We went on a gizmo that spiralled its way up and down over sixty feet or so and gave you even more magnificent views. We played with a coin in the slot, remote controlled model boat. We had fries and Coke. We went to the Ocean Theatre and watched a killer whale, a false killer whale, three bottle-nosed dolphins and two sea lions put through their paces. We took the escalator down to the Wild River boat ride, lined up for half an hour, took the ride and got wet. We went back up the escalator and had lunch of roast chicken, fries and fruit salad at a small café. We went to see the sharks, the wave pool with sea lions and the reef atoll with fish galore. It was all very pleasant and I almost completely forgot about danger until we got back to the cable car to go back down.

My sense of unease returned. I was not wrong. Just as the cable clanked over the wheel where there was a change of gradient, there was another noise as a bullet hit the car. I pushed Lan Le to the floor and landed on top of her. I remember thinking it would need to be a very high velocity rifle to come through the wall of the car and actually harm us. The gunman must have decided so too; a bullet twanged off the roof and I decided he was trying to hit the cable—which seemed an even more futile exercise.

He fired two more shots, then all was quiet until we came to the bottom. Someone went to get in our car and stopped dead at the sight of us sprawled on the floor. I jumped up, helped Lan Le out and followed her, being berated by an attendant for not getting out at the proper time. We dodged the cars coming through behind us and got out of there with maximum expedition.

We took a bus back to Pier and the subway to Causeway Bay. We walked to the hotel and I delivered Lan Le to her room. I looked at her crumpled, stained clothes that had looked

## The Ghost in Hong Kong

so smart and knew I'd be getting no more favours from her. I went to my room, took off my shoes, fell on the bed and was soon fast asleep.

When I awoke, it was dark. A woman stood silhouetted against the window.

"That may not be wise," I said, "I saw a guy with a rifle on one of the rooftops the other night and I think he was aiming at me."

"Keep the light off," she said. I recognised the voice instantly. She peered into the gloom at the rooftops below. "I can't see anyone."

"Maybe it was my imagination."

"Which building?" she asked.

I went to the window and pointed it out.

"If he turns up tonight, we'll be ready for him," she promised.

"Forget it."

She shrugged. "Okay...I've got to go. Meet me outside Jack in the Box in half an hour."

We arrived at our assignation almost simultaneously. We went up to the restaurant, ordered and sat down. I ate my tacos and taquitos, Gina her hamburger and fries, without talking. When we had finished, I took the red dragon ring off my finger and gave it to her.

"You fingered me, didn't you?" I demanded. "Used me as bait. I hope you got something out of it."

"Not much...How long have you known?"

"Yesterday."

She looked at me enquiringly but I wasn't ready yet to tell her about Peng's document. But maybe she already knew.

"How did you get into my room?" I asked.

"With a key." She sighed. "I'm sorry about everything."

"So am I. I'm going home to bed—on my own. I may not see you again."

She looked very wistful as I left her but I walked out and didn't look back.

Back in my room, without thinking, I threw the curtains back for one more look at that magnificent view of the harbour. Almost immediately, there was a crack, followed by a louder crack of a bullet penetrating, and passing through, the glass and then a thud as it buried itself in the opposite wall—by which time I was on the floor and squirming under the bed. I heard more shots but no more holes appeared in the glass. Thank God it was toughened, I thought, but it must be a pretty high-powered rifle the guy's using.

How long I stayed in that position I'm not sure. It was at least five minutes, probably longer. Finally, I felt safe enough to edgily close the curtains and stand up. Then it occurred to me that I would have a bit of explaining to do when management found the bullet hole. They might even bring the police into it and then there could be hours, even days, of trying to explain why someone should have a shot at me. Then I had another thought. Those other shots I heard might have been the police trap Gina had promised. In which case, they could be on their way up and there might be more awkward explanations.

I decided my only hope was to go out again, wait till I saw the police arrived and then go back up as though I'd just got in. Then, maybe, I could convince them it was just some nutter taking potshots at windows.

I locked my door, crossed to the elevator and pushed the down button. The elevator was on its way up. As the door opened, I went to get in but was immediately thrust back.

"You stay," the man said and steered me back to my room. I unlocked the door. He motioned to two uniformed police to stay outside and we went in. I sat on the bed, while he stood menacingly not far away.

"Chief Inspector Hsai of the Organised Crime and Triads Unit," he told me. "Please tell why someone shoot at you."

"No idea. Must have been some madman."

## The Ghost in Hong Kong

He reddened. "I lost one of my best officers tonight. I think you know her—Gina Cheung."

My heart and stomach turned over and my face drained of blood. It was useless to deny it. "Yes."

"Yes. She tell me how she give you red dragon ring bring triads out. Very sorry." He bowed his head briefly. "You not know red dragon symbol group set up fight tongs trying bring emperor down and, after that, fight criminal tongs and triads." He shook his head sadly. "She very bad... Why you come Hong Kong '97?"

"To write travel articles."

"Why you see Inspector Peng?"

I sighed. "Okay, I was going to ghostwrite a book for him on corruption, but he was blown up before he gave me anything."

"Why you come back?"

"To do a story for Austrade."

"And to collect stuff from Peng left behind?"

"No."

There was a knock on the door. Chief Inspector Cheung opened it and one of the men he left behind spoke to him in Chinese. He came back into the room.

"He say man found bashed to death toilets Mandarin Hotel has fingerprints of Inspector Peng." He sighed deeply. "I think Peng and Cheung think superheroes fix all crime by selves. How Peng get people say he dead, don't know. He really dead this time... You seen at Mandarin. You see Peng? He give you something?"

I shook my head.

"We search room."

I got up, retrieved Peng's documents and handed them to Hsai. He browsed quickly through them.

"Peng very thorough," he said. "This very useful... Why not give me?"

"Perhaps he didn't trust you."

He thought. "Perhaps. Or perhaps he play both sides."

It was the first time the possibility had occurred to me but it did have a certain logic. Perhaps my real role was to have been to establish him as the corruption-fighting hero, leaving him to carry on his own corruption. Perhaps, but it didn't seem likely.

"Why should he—or I—trust you?"

For answer, he tore open his shirt and showed me his navel region. Incised deeply into the flesh was a triangle.

"Triad do that," he said. "Just before throw over cliff. I live, but months hospital, many operations. I not like triads."

He left with his spoils, leaving me with my thoughts.

I rang Adam, who told me the suspense account was in place but they were relying on a loop to hide traces of past transactions.

In the morning, I took a cab to the station, arrived with just enough time to spare and took the train. The train was newer and smoother but the scenery was despoiled by buildings where countryside and farms used to be. Roads now ran up to the bridges to nowhere.

The station at Guangzhou was new and modern and the touts, beggars and hustlers had gone. I took a taxi to the Dong Fang Hotel and showed the card I had been given there seven years before to the assistant manager. I was told I could find my quarry at the China Hotel. I took another cab to the China Hotel. I presented the card to reception and was told he would be back at noon.

I walked the streets and arrived back precisely at noon. The man I sought was entering just ahead of me. He walked up to the desk and the clerk indicated me behind him. He swung round and a look of recognition came over his face.

"So, you back talk trade," he said. "But is lunch time. Please be my guest."

## The Ghost in Hong Kong

He showed me to the sumptuous dining room and ordered an array of dishes, which we enjoyed while a woman hovered around continually filling our green tea with hot water from a copper kettle with a very long spout. Finally, he brought us round to business.

"So, what you have trade?" he asked.

"A Hong Kong computer consultancy company."

He frowned. "Buy or sell?"

"Sell."

"Why would I want buy Hong Kong consultancy company?"

"It's a very profitable company." I passed over the copy of the balance sheet and profit and loss statement I had run off.

He took it and scanned it. "Small stuff," he said.

"They also have developed some software you might be interested in. It can keep transactions secret from any prying eyes—even the bank's. They install systems for many major banks in Hong Kong."

"They want sell software?"

"It's a package deal. The buyer gets company and all—no competition."

"What price?"

"Twenty-two million US dollars."

He considered for several minutes, all the time eyeing me with eyes that seemed to peer into my soul. Finally, he took out his mobile and made some calls in Chinese. I waited.

"Tomorrow noon New Century Hotel Macau," he said. "Be there with seller and proof of software."

"We'll be there."

I took a cab to the station and waited for the train, trying not to see the police pursuing someone on the other platform.

My nerves were pretty frazzled by the time I got back to my hotel room in Hong Kong but I managed to pull myself together enough to ring Adam.

"How goes it?" I asked.

"Well, I'm not in jail yet. What about you?"

"I'm still free...Have you worked out the secret account business yet?"

"The basics."

"Enough to look good to a prospective buyer?"

"Maybe if they're a bit stupid."

"We'll take the chance. You and Elizabeth meet me tomorrow morning at the Macau ferry terminal and bring it with you."

There was a silence at the other end for some time, then finally a mumbled "okay".

I had barely put the phone down when it rang. It was Lan Le.

"Please come down see me," she said.

I wanted to ask why but merely said "Okay".

She opened the door to my knock and showed me in.

"I'm sorry about Monday," I said. "I didn't know we were going to be shot at."

"Who wears red dragon ring always expect be shot at," she said. "At least you didn't wear it Guangzhou this time."

She went to a draw and pulled out a red dragon ring.

"Mine?" I asked, puzzled.

"Mine."

"Oh."

"Your friends do pretty good job, but not good enough. I fix...Why you go Quanzhou see Mr Lee?"

I told her the story.

"You very foolish. They won't pay for something can get for nothing. If they steal it from you, what will you do? If give them incomplete version, they torture you—or Elizabeth—until they get everything."

## The Ghost in Hong Kong

I suddenly saw that she was right. I had been a complete idiot. All I had achieved was to expose Adam and Elizabeth to a gang of ruthless crooks who would stop at nothing.

"What can I do?"

"Do as they say. But I come with as your banker. I hear you can use gun."

I nodded. She took a small automatic—a seven millimetre, I guessed—from a draw and handed it to me. I put it in my secret pocket.

"I too will be armed," she said. She handed me what looked like a pen. "A digital recorder," she said. "Press the top when we start discussions and we will have everything recorded."

"You didn't just accidentally bump into me that first time we met, did you?"

"No."

I went back to my room and tried to sleep. At first, all I could think of was what a fool I'd been. As I drifted into a half sleep, I suddenly had the fantastic idea that maybe I had been an even bigger fool than I'd realised. Maybe the whole thing was a put-up job. Maybe this red dragon society could even reach into Austrade. Maybe Elizabeth was another member. Maybe the whole funds diversion thing was just a story. Maybe the red dragon society didn't exist or maybe it was even really a criminal organisation. But Peng had laid out details of its existence and Hsai had more or less confirmed them.

I fell into a nightmarish kind of sleep that left me more exhausted than if I had not slept at all.

In the morning Lan Le and I caught a ferry to the Arts Centre, walked around and then caught the subway to the Macau ferry terminal. Adam and Elizabeth were waiting.

"You wait here," Lan Le said and went off, presumably to get tickets. She came back and said, "Follow me", and led us away from the ferry terminal. When I pointed this out, she said, "We go helicopter."

She led us to a reception centre where we were all weighed and then up on the roof to the helicopter.

Under any other circumstances, it would have been a delightful trip, flying low over harbour, boats, islands, ocean and the Pearl River, but we were all rather too preoccupied to take much in.

The helicopter landed on the roof of a building in Macau and we were ushered through immigration and customs with great speed while the long queues of passengers who had come on the ferry eyed us with envy and resentment.

There were several drivers touting tours. To my surprise, Lan Le selected one and appeared to haggle over price. Wondering what was going on, we trooped after the driver and he showed us into his car.

"We early," was Lan Le's only explanation, but she talked softly in Chinese to the driver as we went through the narrow streets, Elizabeth explaining the colour coded buildings for us and pointing out other sights.

We arrived at the New Century Hotel almost on the stroke of noon. We went in. The group awaited us. Lee rose to greet me.

"These two may be interested buy company," he said, indicating two well-fed looking Chinese gentlemen. "This our computer expert." He looked like a Chinese Bill Gates. "This my personal assistant." I looked at the well-built man and remembered where I had seen that face before—on a lake in Guangzhou aiming a gun at me and/or Elizabeth. So, he hadn't drowned after all. Pity! He gave no sign of recognition but he had to know who we were. And it seemed more than likely that Lee had been the one who sent him to kill us.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled more than a little but I think I managed to appear calm as I introduced my group. What now, I wondered—a bedroom, a boardroom or office set aside for businessmen?

"We go eat Japanese restaurant," the trader said, "but we eat Portuguese. Okay?"

I was surprised but, together with the others, trooped after him to the restaurant.

"Sorry tables only seat six," he said.

## The Ghost in Hong Kong

"You, you, you and you," he said, pointing in turn at me, Adam, Elizabeth and his computer expert, "will sit with me. Others over there," pointing to an opposite table.

We ate a tasty meal of sopa, beef and chicken washed down with Portuguese wine. The coffee arrived.

"You got program?" asked the trader.

Elizabeth handed over several pages of code. He passed it on to the computer expert, who studied it intently while the rest of us drank our coffee in silence. Finally, he threw it on the table and said something in Chinese.

"He say no good, we have better already."

Elizabeth looked crestfallen. She said something in Chinese to the computer expert. He replied at length, picking up the code and indicating points vigorously. Then he threw the paper down on the table again in apparent disgust.

"He's right," Elizabeth said to me, "I'm not as smart as I thought I was."

I shrugged. "That's life. You win some, you lose some."

"You go back Hong Kong now?" the trader asked.

"Yes."

"Turboferry?"

Maybe he was just making small talk but... "Ordinary ferry. Can't stand the bumpy ride on the turboferry," I replied.

I stood up. "Sorry to have wasted your time. You must at least let me pay for the meal."

He waved a hand in dismissal.

The tour driver was still waiting. He took us to the ferry terminal, with much low conversation between him and Lan Le on the way. We made as though we were intending to take the normal ferry then headed for the turboferry.

We passed the other ferry en route and arrived back at the Hong Kong terminal. Police were everywhere. I saw Chief Inspector Tsai and went up to him.

"What's on?" I asked.

"Ferry hijacked. Chinese police have men aboard. We wait interview passengers, see any more accomplices... You go back Australia now?"

"Tonight."

"Good. I send you stuff triads Australia. Make good story."

"Thanks."

"Thank you. Long time we suspect Hong Kong 14K try link up with crooks Guangzhou and Macau. Couldn't prove. Now can. Got some top guys too. We get others."

"All you bastards have been using me all along, haven't you? As a long time goon fan, I should have known Chinese were devilishly cunning."

He looked at me blankly.

"Forget it," I said. "Take care."

I rejoined the other three. They went with me back to the hotel, watched while I packed, went with me in a cab to the station, made sure my flight details were correct, went with me on the train to the airport and saw me off on the plane. Somehow, I had the distinct impression they were making absolutely sure I got on that plane. It was only when I was about to go through the screen that Lan Le remembered the gun she'd given me. A quick trip out to the car park and we made the swap.

Back in Brisbane, I did nothing but laze around for weeks. I told myself it was jet lag, but jet lag that went on for weeks? People did contact me with jobs but nothing piqued my interest and I told them I was busy.

Towards the end of the second week, a parcel arrived from Chief Inspector Tsai. How he got my address, I don't know. I opened it and found a good bulk of material on triads in Australia. It looked interesting but what was I going to do with it? Our police undoubtedly had been given the same information.

## The Ghost in Hong Kong

I wondered often how Adam and Elizabeth were doing. Then an e-mail arrived from Adam telling me they had got several new contracts from banks and government departments and their profits for the year looked like being very spectacular. He wanted to send me a commission since it had been due to me they had got most of the work and asked for my bank details so he could send a direct credit. The only way I could see I could have had anything to do with it was if Lan Le had used her influence. I e-mailed back protesting I'd done almost nothing but giving him my bank details.

Today, I received a bank statement and found a direct credit of 100,000 Australian dollars—about a hundred times more than I expected. Okay, so it's not enough to retire on but I'll be able to have a damned good holiday.