

CHAPTER 8

The park at the back of my apartment had outworn its charm. Between the peeling benches, the imaginative graffiti, the broken toilets reeking of stale urine and the middle-aged man who insisted on singing 80s ballads on his acoustic guitar in the old, abandoned bandstand, the place wasn't so much a running route as it was an assault on the senses.

So I'd upgraded to the canal path, a nice five mile run to the lock bridge and back. At least nobody yelled tuneless Bon Jovi lyrics at me.

The hooded top I wore hung a size too big, convenient for hiding my gun and face. I wasn't sure Finnigan had people out scouring the area for that chance encounter, but I'd look really dumb if I stopped a bullet jogging along the tow path. Still, paranoia saves lives. Mostly mine.

The gun in its holster thumped against my ribs in a tempo I could never quite sync with my breathing, but after a while I got the rhythm and forgot it was there.

I knew I needed to beat the police to Finnigan. Even if he was arrested he might still have someone try to kill me out of spite. If I killed the fat fuck first it would hopefully negate that threat.

A pre-emptive strike will only work when all the ground work has been done, all preparations made and the enemy ignorant of your intentions. That wasn't Sun Tzu. That was Richard Wolfe

One day I'd publish *Wolfe's Art of Questionable Wisdom*: a slim volume of tips like *Always sit facing the door. Never trust a man who wears shoes without socks. If someone says, "trust me," do the opposite. And the cliché, shoot first; ask questions later.*

I had been so absorbed in my musings that I had nearly reached the halfway point. The canal was still and black. What was it about water that draws people to walk beside it, or sit and look at it, contemplating their life? I had enjoyed taking junks across Hong Kong harbour just for the peace and solitude.

I passed several shabby little tents dotted along the bank with fishermen clutching a thermos and braving the icy sleet with the grim determination of men who refused to accept that the last fish in this muddy soup probably died decades ago and their only potential catch would be shopping carts and old used condoms.

I crossed the footbridge and turned back toward my apartment. A few other joggers nodded at me in recognition of another madman running in the rain. The fencing to my left at this point backed onto the railway line for about a mile then twisted away to be replaced by the back yards of small terrace houses.

By the time I got home, my clothes were soaked and my legs were complaining. I baptised myself under a scalding shower, enough to revive. I made myself some coffee and tried the TV channels again of which there seemed to be about a million. After ten minutes of channel hopping, I concluded every program was either unchanged since I left the country thirty years ago or had been produced specifically to target audiences in comas. So I retreated to Shakespeare—Janine's idea. Apparently reading Hamlet would "expand my mind." I was quickly discovering my mind was creaking under the strain and the only thing it was expanding was the list of words I needed a dictionary for.

I had watched Shakespeare only once many years ago. *Midsummer's Night's Dream*. The audience would laugh at various times through the play and I was looking to see who had got the pie in the face. If Shakespeare was the party, I was the saddy in the kitchen.

Once dressed, I headed out in my hatchback. Katherine refused to let me park it in her

assigned bay. Apparently, she had standards to keep and my paltry vehicle didn't cut the mustard.

My current assignment involved trailing Harold Belmont, a local businessman whose commitment to marriage was so flimsy it should've come with a disclaimer. The money in the marriage was his wife's and apparently a clause in their prenup stated that if he committed adultery, he got nothing if they divorced.

I was in my car heading to the Holiday Inn Wembley to watch my man with his fifth blonde in two weeks. She was at least half his age, which put her at about thirty.

I waited on the carpark until they arrived in separate cars. I followed them into the reception and stood a respectful distance behind while he booked a twin room. I had my phone in the top pocket of my leather jacket filming the exchange. When the receptionist gave him his key card, I noted the room number and quickly got ahead of them and waited just around the corner of the floor his room was on.

The two love birds exited the lift arm in arm, sharing a tender kiss before entering the room. Perhaps I was unfairly judging Mr. Belmont. Maybe it was a business conference and the kiss was just friendly. No, I didn't believe that at all. Harry was undoubtedly ripping her clothes off as I stood at the door and listened. If I had been in there, I would be ripping her clothes off too. The sounds coming from inside were not business in nature. Unless that business was fucking. I had to admire the guy though. He clearly had some stamina. His wife could either divorce him or just wait a few more months until he had a fatal coronary.

I stood outside the door for twenty minutes recording the amorous grunts and moans from within until I got bored, or maybe envious. I waited in my car until they came out an hour later. Belmont strutting like a man who'd just discovered fire. They shared another tender kiss before Harry climbed into his expensive Mercedes and she slipped slightly

flushed into her dated mini. With my evidence intact I called Katherine.

"It's me," I said.

"I know," she said. "My phone plays the Darth Vader theme when you call. Helps me prepare emotionally."

Shortly after arriving in Westbridge, Katherine had suggested that being part of the Triad in Hong Kong was like working for the dark side.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"I'm on da case, baby doll," I said. "An' I got da 411 on the lowdown dirty double dealer."

"Who was that supposed to be?" she asked.

"I was going for Philip Marlow," I said.

"So effectively you're doing Humphry Bogart?" she said. "It sounds more like Humphry the hippo from that kid's show."

"Everyone's a critic."

"I'm assuming you have evidence on Harold Belmont's latest tryst," Katherine said.

"I preferred the way I said it," I said.

"Meet me at the office, Phil," she said. "An' you can spill da beans."

I winced. "And you criticise *my* impressions."

"I'm a woman doing Marlow," she said. "Unlike you, I have a legitimate excuse to be bad at it."

When I was looking for my niece, Katherine had set me up in a small office in an attic above an estate agent shop on East street in Westbridge. A previous investigator had used it and the legal firm were going to close it down but decided to keep it open for a short time for me. Katherine had been so impressed with my results in finding and extracting my niece

that she had persuaded her partners to extend the lease and let me use it. The office was accessed through a side entrance and a rickety staircase up two floors that creaked like an elderly man getting out of bed.

Inside, the décor hadn't improved. The filing cabinet sat empty and unused, judging me silently. The coffee machine gurgled with the devotion of a faithful dog. On the desk was a cutting edge laptop that had replace the previous piece of dinosaur technology.

Katherine was waiting for me when I arrived. She had the coffee machine running and was staring out of the single window looking down onto the street.

I put my jacket on the back of the chair, poured two cups and placed them on the desk. I sat at what she called the business end of the desk and she sat opposite me, sipping her coffee.

"So," she said, "where was this clandestine meeting?"

"Harry's latest assignation was at the Holiday Inn, Wembley," I said.

She arched an eyebrow. "Assignation? I'm impressed. Is Janine helping you with the big words?"

"I know big words," I protested. "But if I use them in front of my new tough friends I might get beaten up."

"Tell me what happened," she said.

"I filmed them checking in at reception and followed them up to the room where I listened at the door as Harold took his fifth conquest this week to sexual heaven."

"You were listening at the door?" she asked, grimacing.

"I was just being thorough."

"Some would call that being perverted," Katherine said, not attempting to hide the disgust in her voice.

“Hey, Harry’s a stud,” I said.

“He’s a fat ugly slug with a lot of money and an inflated idea of his own sexual allure,” Katherine said. “Did you get some evidence.”

I pulled out my phone and called up the footage of Harold and the blonde, and handed it over to Katherine.

“That’s the evidence I got from today,” I said.

She watched the film, grimacing at the sexually explicit sounds coming from the room.

“That’s gruesome,” she said. “What some women will do for a man in a flash car and an expensive suit.”

“That’s where I’m going wrong,” I said. “If I buy a new car and a suit, think that will work for me too?”

“If it worked for Harry, it’ll work for you,” she said. “Most women can overcome their natural revulsion where money is concerned.”

“Thanks for the ringing endorsement,” I said. “I’m thinking of getting some sex tips off Harry.”

“Well Harry’s goose is cooked,” Katherine said. “With this evidence and the other material you gathered, I think we finally have enough to nail him against the door.”

“I think that’s what Harry was doing to the blonde when I left.”

“Grim,” she said, scowling at me. “Are you still picking up Janine from the school later?”

“Until Finnigan is found,” I said. “Or otherwise neutralized.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Katherine said.

I rang Katherine’s phone and listened to the Darth Vader theme and tried out my evil laugh.