

THE CAPER CONTINUES ...

## The God of War



I was led into the back of the Green Stream restaurant by two trim men in their early 30s. Their faces were not so much hard as efficient, and they spoke very little. "The Mountain Lord wants you," was all they would say. The Green Stream was a Triad stronghold.

THE MOUNTAIN LORD was not hung with gold or surrounded by a multitude of powerful retainers. He was sitting quietly at a table in a back room of the restaurant. If not for the air of authority, and the deference of the young men, I would have thought him an old Chinese retiree. "Wong Lung Tao," I addressed him, and bowed. Of the Triad godfathers in San Francisco and Oakland, Wong Lung Tao was the oldest

and most powerful of the dragon heads.

"So you are Wai Jing," he said, using my Chinese name. He motioned for me to sit down, made a small movement with his finger, and one of the men standing by the door left the room. My back prickled. Wong Lung Tao studied me in silence. The man returned with a pot of tea, and set it on the table. The other laid out cups. Then they retired to the door again. Wong Lung Tao lifted the teapot and poured a cup for me. "Your grandfather and I had our battles, Wai Jing, but he was a man worthy of respect," he said.

I saluted him with bent knuckles on the table, not just tapping the fingertips but making the full gesture that said "I kowtow to you."

He nodded. "Ah, the old forms." He raised



*The truth is, your parents were the target...*

his eyebrows slightly and sighed with a half smile.

“Wai Jing, they tell me you are good with the herbs. My sleep is bad, a long time now. I have seen many of the doctors here in Chinatown. But all these things I take are no good.” He made another gesture with his finger, and one of the young men stepped forward with a small briefcase, opened it, and removed a sheaf of thin papers, which he handed to the Mountain Lord.

Wong Lung Tao looked at them for a moment, nodded, then handed them over to me.

I shuffled through them. They were herb prescriptions, and all were for *Gui Pi*, *Suan Zao Ren*, *Chai Hu Jia Long Gu Mu Li*, *Gan Mai Da Zao* and the like.

Thinking for a moment, I asked him his symptoms. Fundamentally, he was quite healthy for his age. There was the expected underlying tension that went with his job, but after checking him over thoroughly the only thing that stood out was a bit of choppiness to the pulse. Then I asked to see under his tongue.

Dark thick veins.

Bingo.

My grandfather had read out to me Wang Qing-Ren's notes to his book *Yi Lin Gai Cuo* (Correction of Errors Among Physicians): *when the usual formulas are ineffective for insomnia, use Xue Fu Zhu Yu Tang*. I wrote out a script using the original doses:

<i>Dang Gui</i>	9g	Angelicae Sinensis Radix
<i>Tao Ren</i>	12g	Persicae Semen
<i>Sheng Di</i>	9g	Rehmanniae Radix
<i>Hong Hua</i>	9g	Carthami Flos
<i>Zhi Ke</i>	6g	Aurantii Fructus
<i>Chi Shao</i>	6g	Plantaginis Semen
<i>Chai Hu</i>	3g	Bupleuri Radix
<i>Gan Cao</i>	3g	Glycyrrhizae Radix
<i>Jie Geng</i>	4.5g	Platycodi Radix
<i>Chuan Xiong</i>	4.5g	Chuanxiong Rhizoma
<i>Niu Xi</i>	9g	Achyranthis Bidentatae Radix

I explained my thinking to Wong Lung Tao and he nodded.

“Thank you, Wai Jing. This technique of eliminating obstruction is one that I have also had occasion to use in the past.” His placid smile was more terrifying than the click of a switchblade.

He motioned for me to go. The young men approached my chair.

I remained seated.

Wong Lung Tao's eyes narrowed and he leaned forward. I spoke quickly. “My grandfather said that if I was ever in great need I should talk to you, Wong Lung Tao.”

He closed his eyes for the space of a breath, then opened them and signalled to the men. They returned to the door. He sat back and gave a small smile.

“So what would you have of me, young Wai Jing?”

“Tell me about the night my parents died.”

I surprised myself; I had intended to ask how to deal with the current triad situation.

Wong Lung Tao was silent for a moment, then shook his head. “That was a bad business. It was another Tong who ordered it. The shooter was a young man. His first job, his first hit.” He sighed.

“And my parents got in the way,” I said. His image became blurry. I looked away.

“Is that what you think?” he asked with curiosity.

I twisted my head back towards him. “Yes, Lung Tao. What else could it be?”

He regarded me with concern. “So that's what your grandfather told you. Well, I can understand that.”

He hesitated. “The truth is, your parents were the target.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your grandfather was getting too close to a very big deal for this other Tong. The hit on your parents was a serious warning. He had ignored several earlier warnings.”

My world dropped apart in slow chunks. “Why didn't they just kill him?”

He laughed grimly. “Your grandfather was too careful for that. They could never get close enough.”

I was silent. Factors in my life, the stories I had told myself about myself, all were shifting and moving, re-forming themselves in new patterns. This answered many questions. It also opened new ones.

“Who was the shooter?”

“Like I said. He was just a kid, his first job.”

“But who was it?”

“That I cannot tell you.”

“Can't, or won't?”

“For you, the result is the same.”

"I'll find out," I said.

He smiled.

Another question surfaced. "Why didn't my grandfather go after him? He was the great detective, after all."

The old man's look softened. "Because of you. You were his final warning. Dig any more and you would disappear. He loved you, you know."

Years of severe discipline and teaching came crowding back, and another layer of restructuring took place. I nodded, the table blurry again.

"I can tell you this, however," the old man said. "The shooter used an unusual gun, a plastic pistol. Fired automatic bursts of three. It was too big for him. And because of the number of people killed, he was spirited away overseas, Hong Kong and elsewhere, until the heat cooled."

"He came back?" My face became hot and my breathing quickened.

"Let us see whether you are truly your grandfather's heir."

There was a long silence and he gestured for me to go. I stood and was escorted to the front by one of the young men.

As I passed the kitchen, I waved to the owner, little Louie Chee. After my grandfather died, Louie had given me a job washing dishes at his previous restaurant, and two hot meals per day. He was like an uncle.

I stepped out the door and the window shattered, masking the sound of the gunshot. Another shot kicked up splinters from the sidewalk. I dove for the ground behind a parked car, keeping my head down. Another shot pinged from the hood of the car, and I scrambled back through the doorway into the dark of the restaurant. There were a few moments of silence, and Louie sidled up the wall to stand next to me.

"Someone owe you a lot of money, Mal?" he asked, completely unfazed. The Green Stream had its share of shootings.

"Not that I can think of," I said. I brushed a piece of sidewalk from my clothes.

"Maybe you should go out the back way," Louie suggested.

AT MY apartment I made myself a coffee; *Abonay* tea was no match for the mood I was in. After a moment, I added a dash of bourbon, then sat and slowly swirled the black

liquid around the cup. Shafts of afternoon sunlight moved back and forth across the table with the slow shifting of the venetians.

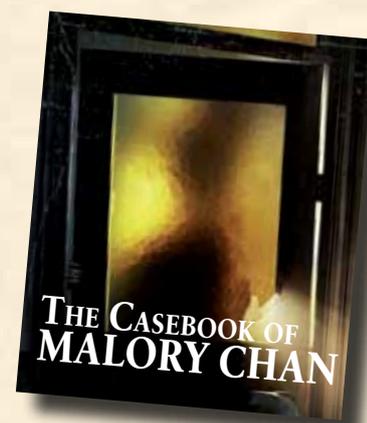
Last night, the gangster Tony Wu had invaded my office. It was only a few hours ago that I'd heard him give the command to shoot Lyla, ex-patient, museum conservationist and arguably the most beautiful girl I'd known in a long time. Four days ago my friend Jimmy had gone missing in his search for the smuggled treasure he thought would make him rich. His friend Lamont was already dead due to that treasure. We had not even known what it was until I'd found out from Lyla earlier: a translucent jade vessel. And that vessel contained the embalmed head of the third century general Guan Yu. It was a prize for which the collective triad gangs of Hong Kong had murdered themselves sparse: the head of their patron saint, the god of war. Any gang possessing that head could claim absolute superiority. That was before the urn and its contents had been whisked out of the colony, and smuggled into the Port of San Francisco.

Now, it seemed, Jimmy had found this treasure; at least Tony Wu thought so. And it might be true, I mused. Jimmy had sent me a registered parcel, still waiting to be picked up at the post office. Whether it was the thing itself or a clue to getting it, I had no idea. But I was supposed to meet Tony Wu at the Mars Hotel at 10 tonight to discuss just that.

Wong Lung Tao's words at the Green Stream festered within me. My parents were murdered and I had done nothing about it. My aimless waffling had gotten Lyla killed, too. I had always tried to avoid violence. But now it seemed that violence was seeking me out.

I finished my coffee and stood up. I had a bit of seeking to do myself.

I ARRIVED at the Asian Art Museum, looking for the conservation department. A list of room numbers showed me where to go, and I walked down some stairs to the deserted hall. An irrational fantasy grew in my mind that I would find Lyla healthy and well, working in her office. But the door to that office was locked, and no light showed through the transom. Thumbtacked to a little bulletin board next to the door were Lyla's office hours and a faded picture of the Plitvice Lakes





*It was prize for which the triads gangs of Hong Kong had murdered themselves sparse.*

in Croatia.

Down the hall a sliver of light emerged from a half-open door. I walked over to it, saw “Victor Fang” on the nameplate. I was in luck. This was the visiting scholar that Lyla had mentioned at our lunch the day before. He should be able to tell me much more about the priceless jade vessel that everyone was after. I knocked, and after hearing a low grunt of assent, I went in.

He looked over his glasses at my card, shoulders hunched, then looked up at me with a puzzled expression.

“I’m not sure I understand,” he said. “I really don’t think I need an herbalist just at this moment.”

His English was virtually unaccented. He was 40-something, black hair just over the ears in the current fashion, wool-knit sweater slightly worn at the elbows. All he needed was a meerschaum pipe to complete the picture.

Feeling like an undergraduate student, I said “I would like to know about the head of General Guan Yu.”

“You mean the one Cao Cao buried in a special tomb somewhere in Hupeh, back in 219AD?”

“No, I mean the one that showed up here in San Francisco, smuggled in last month.”

There was a subtle change to his face. “Yes? Why talk to me?”

“Lyla said you were the man who knew.”

I saw him redden. “She can be quite charming,” he said softly.

“Lyla is missing,” I said. “She may be dead.”

His reaction surprised me.

“Is that supposed to be a threat?” He sat back in his chair. I noticed that the desk drawer in front of him was now slightly open.

I frowned. “No. I just thought you might be concerned.”

“Let me tell you one thing Mr ...” he looked at my card. “Chan?” He looked me up and down, then gave an almost imperceptible shrug. “Leave the head alone. It is dangerous to get involved in what is almost certainly none of your business.”

“Now that sounds like a threat.”

“You can look at it as a friendly warning, if you prefer.” He stood up and went to the

door of his office, opened it. “Now if you don’t mind ...”

I could have pushed the issue but at the moment there was no reason why I should. I heard the door shut firmly behind me.

UP IN the museum lobby, I glanced at my watch, then made a call from a payphone along the wall. Jimmy’s wife answered. I’d only met her twice but knew and liked her. She was the level head in the family.

“Mal, have you heard from him?”

“Sorry, Katie.”

There was the slight sound of an indrawn breath. “Mal, can you help me find him? I’m frantic. And the dog has gone missing too. I’ve tried the police, they just say it happens all the time and not to worry.”

I was relieved: at least Jimmy was not in jail. Then I bit my lip. It was not yet time to mention the morgue.

“What about his friends?”

“I’ve tried all the ones I know. No luck.”

“Did he take anything with him? Suitcase? The car?”

“The Falcon is gone. Don’t know about suitcases.”

I was silent, thinking, when she said “Mal, there is a phone number I don’t recognise. It was on the pad by the phone.”

“He left it written out there?”

“Well, no, the sheet was torn off. But the impression, you know? I rubbed over it with the pencil.” She was pleased with herself. Then her voice changed. “I have rung it again and again. Only an answering machine, saying leave a message. I don’t know what else I can do.”

I got the number from her and told her I’d track it down.

THE public library was just around the corner on Fulton Street. With the help of a perky young librarian I located the Haines San Francisco and Suburban Criss-cross Directory. The number belonged to a Mr Augustus Neith, with an address on Camino del Canyon, in Marin county. I wrote that down. Then, on a hunch, I asked her to help me find the section for archeological journals.

I flipped through each journal and tossed

it on the pile growing next to me until I spotted the article I wanted. It said a priceless third-century jade funeral urn had been exhumed in Hupeh by the Harvard-trained Chinese archeologist Victor Fang. I shut the journal and sat back, thinking.

His being here in San Francisco, right now, was no coincidence.

**A**LATE dinner at Pat O'Shea's Mad Hatter on Geary left me needing one more bourbon before the meeting at the Mars. My plan was to use Sun Tzu's strategy: *lei yi yau ji* – entice him with profit. Tony Wu was convinced I could lay my hands on that jade urn. I would use that to my advantage. I had hoped to have Jimmy as backup, but he was nowhere to be seen. I was going in solo.

Thinking of Sun Tzu and Jimmy gave me an idea, though, and I made a phone call.

I hung around the corner of Fourth and Howard until I saw a familiar-looking pickup truck circling the block. Then I entered the run-down lobby of the Mars.

At the desk they told me top floor, executive suite.

**T**HE door was opened by a tall girl with very black hair in a pageboy cut. She had pale skin and the deadest eyes I've ever seen. I'd been ready for violence, but she seemed to be the only one there. The executive suite was a selection of four shabby rooms, two bedrooms and two sitting rooms, one with a cold fireplace and a bar.

"Yeah, Tony said you'd be coming," she said. "I'm Cyrinda."

"Unusual name," I said.

"Cruel parents," she said. "Want a drink?"

"No thanks."

"Suit yourself." She poured a clear liquid into a glass of antique carved crystal and sat down on the threadbare sofa, looking at me.

"I expected Tony."

"He went out this afternoon, said he'd be back in an hour." She paused, took a deep drink from the glass. A hint of flame ignited in the depths of those dead eyes. "I hope he never comes back, him and Miss Montana."

My heart skipped a beat. "What?"

"I said he can go jump in a lake, the lousy two-timing creep." She was looking at

nothing, nursing her spite.

"No, the other thing. Miss Montana, you said."

"Little miss pure, little miss oh-so-clever? Tony drooled every time he looked at her. It was disgusting." Her gaze was totally inward, reviewing her own private reservoir of hate.

"She's still alive!?"

My tone of voice brought Cyrinda out of it, and she looked up.

"Yeah, sure," she said with some surprise. "What, you thought Tony was drooling over a mummy or something?"

I explained about the gunshot I'd heard on the phone, the one that I thought had killed Lyla, and she gave a bitter laugh. "That's Tony all over. Just loves to play with people's heads. No, she's alive all right."

Then she looked at me more closely. "Oh, don't tell me: she's got you hooked too?" She stood in a rage, marched over to the door and opened it so hard it banged on the wall and bounced halfway closed again. She pulled it all the way open, jerked her head and said "Get out."

I stood, but took my time heading toward the door. "Any idea where they went?"

"They mighta gone to hell for all I care."

I hesitated at the door, just about to say something, when an earth tremor shook the building and she fell forward into my arms. I held her and began the earthquake count every San Francisco native learns from infancy: *one ... two ...* when it reached five it was the big one. But it had stopped already. She pulled back, looking up at me.

"Sorry," she said. "I'll never get used to those things."

"You don't need to worry, you know," I said. "Tony hasn't got a chance with her."

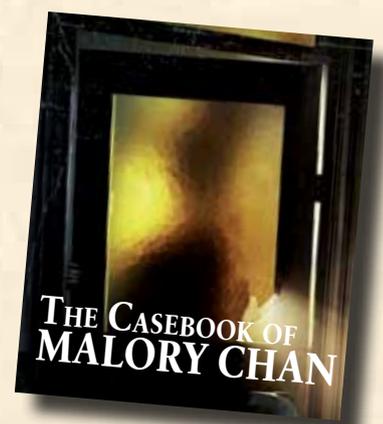
Her look softened. Just then the elevator doors down the corridor opened, and a loud voice came out of it.

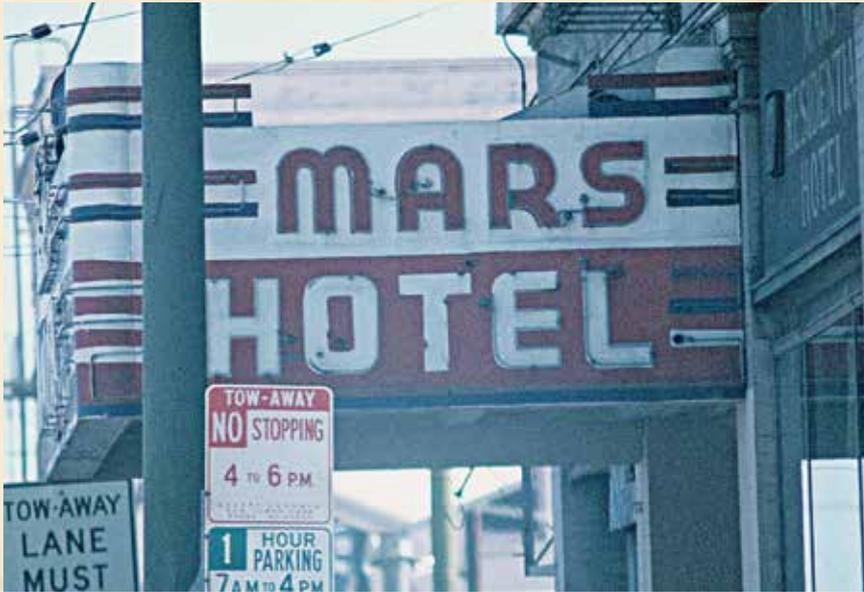
"Once we find out who it was, we slaughter them," it said. There was a gruff indistinct reply.

"It's Tony," the pale girl said. She pulled me inside and shut the door. She looked around and pushed me toward the other sitting room.

"What ...?"

"There's no time," she said. "He's got Moose with him. Tony talked about





what he was going to do with you when you came. It wasn't nice." She pushed me into the room, and pointed. "That door leads to the hall. Wait till Tony and Moose come in, then use the door. But make it quiet!"

She didn't have to tell me. I had come to the Mars to have it out with Tony, him or me. But learning that Lyla was still alive changed all that. I had to find her, help her. And I couldn't do that from hospital.

Voices came from the other room. I should be getting out, but I lingered, listening.

"You weren't here, he went away," the girl's voice was saying. Tony's voice was a low angry rumble.

"What was I supposed to do, tackle him?" she said. "Where were you, anyway?" Tony's voice got agitated.

"What? Who'd have the guts to try and snatch you?"

I could hear Tony plainly now as he seated himself in a chair closer to the door of my room.

"Amateurs. Couple of guys and a pickup, you believe that?" He chuckled, no longer angry. I heard ice clinking in a glass. "Soon as Moose knocked one down and showed the other his piece they took off."

That was enough. My phone call to Joe Lashinki had done the trick, but his union goons Mick and Sal weren't up to the job. It didn't matter, the whole point had been to keep Tony off-balance and give me a chance to check out his rooms.

I eased myself out into the hallway, and down the fire exit.

I CALLED my secretary Phyllis at home. She sounded groggy.

"Sorry Phyl, I know it's late."

"There goes your last excuse."

I ignored that. "Just wanted to remind you about the post office Monday morning. You know, the parcel?"

The silence on the other end grew ominous.

"It's important, Phyl, and you'll need to be careful when you pick it up."

"What, so I don't get a papercut? Mal, are you drunk?"

"Look out for people watching you. And don't take it to the office. Take it to the diner, you know the one. I'll be waiting there."

"Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not following you, right?"

"Phyl, you do this I'll buy you a slice of that lemon meringue."

There was a pause. "You're on."

MY 78 Impala sat neglected in the car park under my apartment building. I held my breakfast of slightly burned toast between my teeth as I inserted the key. The engine turned over and stopped, growling like a petulant cat roused from a sunny spot on the sofa. Finally it caught, and finishing my breakfast I nursed it up the Embarcadero past the Ferry Building and over the bridge. The morning was beautiful as I drove north past Sausalito. I took the turn-off for Almonte and the Tamalpais valley, found Muir Woods Road, and from there wound back and forth up Camino del Canyon until I located the obscured driveway marked by a rusted iron mailbox.

Now I had to make my choice. Go in cold on this visit to Mr Augustus Neith, or hang back and watch for a bit? I turned the car around and found a sheltered turnout that would allow me to keep the mailbox in view.

There followed two hours of increasing heat as the shadows shifted away from the car. In the first hour, two men on horseback came down the driveway and turned onto a trail by the side of the road heading along a ridge into the hills. One was very tall, the other fat. Both were armed, the fat one with a holstered revolver, the tall one had a rifle in a scabbard attached to his saddle.

After that was a long period of quiet until

I heard a car coming down the driveway. Although I could not see the driver clearly, it was a white Falcon, and it turned up the road away from me. After a moment I pulled out and followed. We passed back down through the curves and along Muir-Woods Road for about five miles until we came to Muir Beach, where the Falcon pulled into the parking lot of a small roadside grocery. It was Jimmy all right. He got out and went in.

When he came out I was leaning against his car. He nearly dropped the beer and the bag of groceries he was carrying.

“Jeez, Mal, what the hell are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing, Jimmy. Katie is worried sick.”

We sat down on a wooden bench in front of the store, in the shade of the veranda. Cigarette butts littered the ground.

“I thought I’d better get out of Dodge for a while,” he said, kicking at the butts. “So I came to stay with some old friends up here.” He looked a bit sheepish. “I thought it would be safer if Katie didn’t know.” Then he got curious. “But how’d you track me down?”

“Your wife is a pretty good detective.”

“I’m doin’ it for her,” he said, and though it was not completely clear what he thought he was doing, I believed him.

“So who are these friends?” I asked.

“Almost family, Mal. Their place is pretty interesting. I’ll take you up there. They grow all their own food, and have it all thought out.”

“Have all what thought out?”

“What’s going to happen when everything breaks down.” He had the look of a convert. “When the electricity goes off and there’s no fresh water, and the gas stations run out of gas and everybody’s going to panic. It’ll be a disaster.” His expression said it would be the most fun he’d ever had.

“Hey Jimmy, maybe you don’t know it, but we have a disaster right here and now, remember?”

“What?” He came back to me then, his eyes clearing. “Oh, yeah, the thing.” Then he laughed. “Lamont had it hid in the fishtank. No wonder they didn’t find it.” He looked at me. “Don’t know what the heck it is, but it’s beautiful, Mal. Wait’ll you see it.”

“Where is it now?”

“Locker at Transbay.” He gestured at me with one hand. “You know, the key I mailed you.” He shrugged. “I just didn’t want it on me if they ...”

“I don’t have it, Jimmy. Monday. We missed the mail.”

“Monday. Ok, no problem. Anyway, we can bring it up here to Gus’s place and just sit on it till the heat is off.”

I shook my head. “Jimmy, this thing is dynamite. Half the triads in this hemisphere are after it, and the other half will be, once they find out.”

“So, ok, we’ll sell it to the highest bidder.”

“Jimmy, you’re clueless. You try and sell it to one group, the other group will kill you for doing it. That’s if the first one doesn’t kill you first, just to save the money.”

I laid out for him what Lyla had told me about the object: the severed head of the God of War, its significance for the triads, the debauch of death that trailed it like the long train of a black gown.

He looked at me and shook his head slowly.

“Mal, you used to be pretty gutsy as a kid, but then somethin’ changed.”

I stared at him, suddenly cold. “You know what changed.”

“It was not your fault. They were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“I should have died with them.”

“It was an accident.”

Rage engulfed me. “It was no ‘accident’. It was murder, Jimmy.” Anger choked off my voice.

“What’re you gonna do about it sittin’ in your office the whole time, Mal?” Jimmy put his hand on my shoulder. “Look, I’ve been wanting to say this for a while. It’s like you been froze up or something.”

I shrugged off his hand. “Anyway, it was a long time ago.”

“That don’t make it ok.”

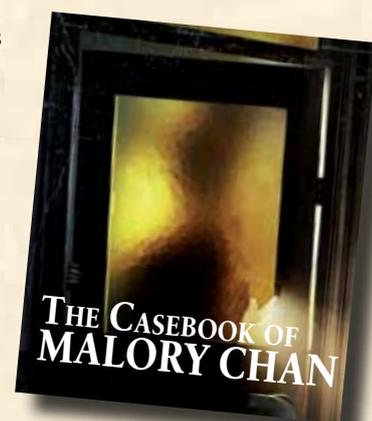
“Forget it, Jimmy. We got bigger problems right now.”

Such as Lyla. *She* I could do something about.

I FOLLOWED Jimmy’s Falcon back up into the hills and turned in at the rusted mailbox. The road leading up from the mailbox was long and deep-



*We call it WTSHTF.  
It’s comin’ believe you me.  
Jus a matter of time.*



rutted, surrounded by trees on all sides. His car raised clouds of dust which lifted into the sky and coated the trees lining the road. I rolled up my windows, despite the heat.

Just as a house came into view, the car slipped in one of the deep ruts and I felt a shuddering clunk. I gritted my teeth. The oil pan? The car and I limped into a graveled area and simmered to a halt next to a barn whose faded walls had once been red. A shed leaned lopsidedly against it. Across from the barn stood a well-kept house. Several old trucks and cars were here and there around the buildings.

I got out and had a look under the car. Oil dripped from the bottom. I cursed softly. I wasn't going very far in this vehicle.

Jimmy walked over and was making concerned noises about the car when a man came out of the house toward us, an ancient character with a thin forehead that stayed thin all the way down his face to end in a narrow chin. He had a grey moustache and grizzled eyebrows that hung above his eyes like vulture's nests perched on a cliff. A white cowboy hat clung precariously to the back of his head.

He arrived in front of us and looked me up and down before he offered me his hand. He did not quite make my height, but the grip was strong.

Jimmy introduced us.

"Mr Neith?" I said.

"You can call me Gus. Come on in. The boys will be back in two shakes."

As we entered the house Gus took off his hat and rubbed his hand across white hair, short like steel wool with pink underneath. Just as my eyes got used to the cool dimness of the room, I heard a door slam in the back of the house. I turned around.

Three men stood in the archway to the kitchen, about as different as God could make them. One was tall and thin, another round and fat-fingered, and the third was square with no neck. Two were the ones I'd seen on horseback.

"Them's Beanpole, Button and Latch. My three sons, just like the TV show," the old man chuckled.

Jimmy and I looked at him blankly. The tall one rolled his eyes. "Never mind Pa," he said. "You must be Mal. I'm Button. This here's Beanpole," he pointed to the round one,

"and that's Latch." The square one nodded.

Button said "Jimmy's told us about this thing, said you'd have it."

"Been a glitch," I said.

Latch nodded again. "Trouble?"

"Probably."

He looked at his brothers. "Don't bother us none. Need to get out more, don't we, boys?" They all grinned.

The round one, Beanpole, said, "How's about a bowl of chilli and a beer, Mal?"

That sounded great. It had been a hot and dusty day, and I'd only had toast for breakfast.

WE sat around talking while I finished the bowl of thick and delicious chili con carne, tortillas and an ice cold beer. Gus and the brothers then showed me their cache containing several years worth of canned food, water and batteries. Hand tools, generators, seed stores and water filtration systems were all kept in tip-top shape. The last item was their truly impressive store of firearms: shotguns, rifles and handguns of various gauges.

"Couple of rimfire .22s, mainly for practice," Beanpole said, pointing. He opened a box and took out another, wrapped in cloth. "A stainless steel Smith and Wesson .44 Model 29-3 with a six-inch barrel for heavier work."

Latch smiled at it fondly.

Button leaned over and lifted a long firearm from a niche in the back. "And this here's a combination shotgun and rifle, a .22 LR over .410 bore shotgun."

"Like our own private army," Jimmy whispered softly.

"Why all the ordnance?" I asked Gus.

"Protection. Society ain't gonna last much longer the way it is."

"Why? What's going to happen to it?"

"We call it WTSHTF. It's comin' believe you me. Jus a matter of time."

"Gus has been waiting for 20 years," Jimmy said, and winked at me.

The old man caught the wink. "Yer daddy knew better, Jimmy. Old sailor like him knew how things could haul off and change right under yer feet." He turned to me. "Jimmy's Pa was bosun's mate on the ship I came back from Korea on. I was all shot up and he helped me out. Back home we kept

in touch. A good man, yer Pa, Jimmy.”

Jimmy said, “And he said if I ever need help, you’re the one to ask.”

“Damn straight.”

LATER in the afternoon, Jimmy and the brothers went to have a look at my car. Gus took me aside and asked, “Jimmy says you’re a doctor, an herb doctor?”

I said I was.

“Well, I got somethin’ a bit personal, don’t know if you can help ...”

Turns out he was suffering with painful hemorrhoids, and Prep H just wasn’t making the grade for him. I warned him off coffee and gave him the script that had worked so often in the past, a slightly modified version of *Zhi Tong Ru Shen Fang* (Stop Pain like a Miracle Formula), plus instructions how to take it.

<i>Qin Jiao</i>	6g	Gentianae Macrophyllae
<i>Tao Ren</i>	10g	Persicae Semen
<i>Cang Zhu</i>	10g	Atractylodis Rhizoma
<i>Fang Feng</i>	10g	Saposhnikoviae Radix
<i>Chao Huang Bai</i>	10g	Phellodendri Cortex
<i>Dang Gui</i>	10g	Angelicae Sinensis Radix
<i>Ze Xie</i>	12g	Alismatis Rhizoma
<i>Bing Lang</i>	8g	Arecae Semen
<i>Da Huang</i>	10g	Rhei Radix Et Rhizoma
<i>Zao Jiao Ci</i>	10g	Gleditsiae Spina
<i>Huai Hua Mi</i>	10g	Sophorae Flos Immaturus

Later that evening, after a venison dinner, I laid out the situation for them and we discussed alternatives. The plan was that on Monday we’d wait for Phyllis at the diner, then go together to the locker at the station, Jimmy and I retrieving the head, the brothers providing cover. Gus planned to stay home. “I *been* shot at,” he said. “Don’t need more.”

I had no time to wait until Monday, though; I ached to get back and look for Lyla. My problem was the car. The solution was the brothers offering to fix it, and Jimmy volunteering to drive me to the ferry the next morning.

WE drove down the hill through the pre-dawn dark in time for the first Larkspur ferry. Jimmy waved and headed back to the farm.

On board, I settled back for the 45 minute

trip over the Bay, but after a few minutes the noise and the stuffiness of the cabin drove me up on deck. It was deserted. Holding the cold wet rail, I looked out at the grey fog which surrounded the vessel. It swirled together with the gunmetal silver of the water and the churning wake behind until it seemed we floated a mile high in dense cloud.

Suddenly I felt something hard prod me in the back.

“Lift ‘em. Don’t turn around.” The voice was muffled.

I raised my hands but couldn’t stop myself: I started to turn around, and got just far enough to see a medium-sized figure in an overcoat and hat with a scarf over his mouth and nose. The turning took me side-up against the rail. He pressed and I was on one foot. A short shove would send me over.

He gave the shove.

With my hands up, there was nothing to grab; not in time, anyway. I hit the cold water shoulder-first, but the rest of me came right along on top of it. I felt the water close over my feet, then kicked and struggled to turn upright. By the time I got my head above the surface again the ferry was disappearing into the fog, its wake widening away from me to either side, the dark waves low and calm.

Spluttering and treading water, I tried yelling, but even the sounds of the ship’s engines were fading into the mist. Meanwhile, I could feel the current carrying me slowly but inexorably out to sea.

■ To be Continued ...

