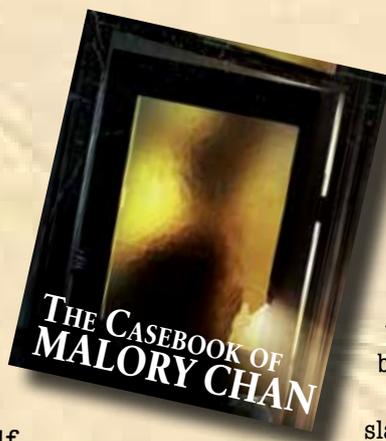


# Sign of the Pit

The cold water was a shock. It took me a moment to recall where I was: pushed off the stern of the Larkspur ferry into San Francisco Bay. I shook the wet hair out of my eyes and shouted after the receding ship. The fog tossed my voice back at me, mockingly. I twisted myself around in a circle, looking for anything, like a buoy, to grab on to, but after 20 yards in any direction it was all mist. I swam a few strokes after the ferry, then stopped. That was no good. I had to think. I could tread freezing water for another hour or so until the next ferry. A wave slapped my face and I spat out salty water. But they wouldn't see me in the fog, and anyway I was being swept out of the ferry lanes by the current. I thought it might be a good time to panic.



THE SOUND OF THE ferry was long gone. So was the feeling in my hands and feet. I moved them anyway, lying as flat in the water as possible, trying to conserve energy and not think about sharks. I listened for the sound of a fin cutting the water. By the time I saw it in the fog, it would be too late.

The only thing I heard was the gentle slap of the waves.

Then there was a creak and the sound of wood on wood. I tried to yell but my chest muscles seemed frozen. All that came out was a short squeak. A sail flapped. I got my breath back and shouted for real. There were voices. A white floating ring landed a few yards away. I swam for it.

On the dock at Gashouse Cove they tried to get me to a doctor. When I refused they told me to keep the blanket and, looking like Sitting Bull after a bath, I flagged down a cab. I told him to roll up the windows and turn on the heater.

By the time we arrived at my apartment the driver was sweating, but he smiled when I paid him with a limp and dripping \$20. I took a long hot shower and lay down. I told myself it was just for a moment, but I'd miscalculated my exhaustion. My head hit the pillow, and I slept.

**S**PIRALS OF INCENSE SMOKE wound their way through shafts of afternoon sunlight. Long thin shadows played over the white silk laid out carefully on the floor; soft clicks could be heard only due to the total silence.

My grandfather was sitting, back straight, yarrow stalks moving to and fro between his hands as he gathered and separated them, laying some down on the clean silk, then separating again, finally turning to make a mark on the small notepad by his side. Six times the ritual was repeated. The marks would reveal a hexagram, one of 64, each with six lines that could either move or stay static: lines that moved gave rise to a second hexagram.

I was 12.

"The changes are unfathomable, Wai Jing," grandfather told me. "Endless, inconceivable, as deep as the human heart." Grandfather had cut each one of those 50 yarrow stalks himself, from milfoil plants growing in the Tianshan mountains. He had dried and preserved the stalks in their silken cloth, to be brought out only when an urgent problem demanded that the *Yi Jing* be consulted.

His hands paused, then he brought the yarrow stalks together with finality, laid them in their cloth. There was a moment of stillness, a long breath in and out. He picked up the notepad upon which he had marked the lines of the hexagram, hesitated, and turned to look at me with concern.

"Kan," he said. "Kan, the Abysmal, doubled." He shook his head "Wai Jing, you are in great danger. There is movement at the second and fourth lines of the hexagram. That makes ..."

I awoke.

This was not grandfather's apartment on Spofford Alley. I was not 12. I did not believe in the *Yi Jing*.

**I**SAT UP and put my feet on the floor, shaking my head to clear its fog.

Thinking of Kan was no surprise, doubled water: I had almost drowned just now. But grandfather's face in my dream was so concerned. I pulled out his old book in which notes overlapped notes; images, comments, warnings.

Kan, the abyss, a deep pit; a doubled snare, a trap; sacrificial vessels; thorns surrounding a prison; an assassin's blade. A jar passed through a window. All meaningless images.

And then a note in grandfather's hand: *Danger is averted through movement.*

I turned to the second hexagram, formed by the changing lines: *Jie* – splitting apart, release, explanation, liberation from bondage.

My head was groggy. I tried to clear it. I did not believe in the *Yi Jing*. And what did any of this have to do with me? I was an herbalist, not a fighter, and even less of a detective. I'd been shot at, pistol-whipped, thrown in the Bay and none of it was my battle.

*What about your parents?* a voice within said. I suppressed it. My parents' death at the Red Dragon was ancient history.

*What about Lyla?* the voice said. The edges of my mouth drew down. It wasn't my fault Tony Wu had kidnapped her. *Be honest with yourself.*

Why did I care so much? I hadn't seen her in months, except for a random coffee now and then. But now all I saw was her face. If I hadn't met her for that lunch, hadn't asked her about the lost head of General Guan Yu, the archeological find in Hupeh ... Was it guilt? Or was it the vulnerability in her blue eyes? My Irish blood stirred.

Something settled deep within. *What would your grandfather have done?* There was no doubt what he would have done.

Lyla was an oriental antiques specialist and the most beautiful woman I'd ever known. She was being held as ransom for a treasure, a symbolic masterpiece that would grant Tony Wu unrivalled mastery of the Triads: the recently unearthed jade vessel containing the head of Guan Yu, the God of War.

I had been passive too long. Movement was indeed needed, and urgently. I checked



■ Malory Chan, of mixed Chinese-Irish descent, practised Chinese medicine in San Francisco in the 1980s. His old casebook has only recently come to light, and excerpts from it are published exclusively in *The Lantern*.

the clock. I had slept less than an hour. It was time to find her.

The last place I'd known Tony to be was the Mars Hotel. There was no place else to start.

I SLOUCHED in a narrow coffee shop across from the entrance to the Mars, working on my second coffee. An earth tremor rocked the table and I put out my hand to steady the cup. Suddenly I sat up. A pale girl with black hair in a pageboy cut was coming out of the hotel, the door held for her by a bull of a man, heavy wide shoulders, not much neck. That must be Moose. I stood, left some coins, and followed.

I had met Cyrinda, the pale girl and Tony's girlfriend, the night before last at the Mars. She'd told me about Moose. She'd also saved my skin that night. But I knew she hated Lyla. Jealousy will do that sometimes.

Cyrinda was walking with short angry steps. Moose was saying something, palms spread, but Cyrinda waved her arm, made a fist and struck her palm with it.

Moose put his hands on his hips and said something else. Cyrinda stopped, looked down, nodded, then gently touched Moose's arm without looking at him. She looked up and started walking again, more calmly.

I was caught by Moose's response. He did not start walking right away, but instead put his hand over the place Cyrinda had touched, looking down at it. Then he looked up and followed her. His heavy steps were now lighter. *Some hidden wheels are turning within Tony's camp*, I thought.

At an expensive establishment several blocks away they got a table. I found a place where I would not be seen. Cyrinda was gazing across the restaurant. I shifted, and could see Tony with Lyla on one side of a booth, facing away from us. On the other side of the booth was a man I almost recognized.

He was leaning back, as if to distance himself from the whole situation. Tony spread what could have been a photo on the table between them. The man jerked forward, stared at it and his eyes widened. He reached out a hand. Tony snatched the photo away, and laughed. The man sat back with a sick look on his face. I knew him now: it was Ed Carroll the city supervisor.

Lyla had seen Tony present this very man with an expensive oriental antique all those months ago, back when she still described Tony as "charming". Tony motioned with his head and the man slid out of the booth. He walked jerkily away, bumping into a table at which a Chinese man sat; mumbled apologies. At the door Ed Carroll turned and I saw his face: he had the stunned look of a man condemned.

Moose walked over, spoke to Tony, then left the restaurant. Cyrinda stood, took a moment to compose herself, then walked over to the booth. Tony had already flung some money on the table and was getting up; Lyla held back.

Now was my chance.

Within two strides I was behind Tony. I used an old bouncer's trick: squatting, I reached my right hand under and between his legs, reaching up and grabbing his belt buckle. With my left I grabbed the back of his collar. Standing, I lifted him bodily, turned his face towards the ground and rammed his nose into the floor. I heard a crunch.

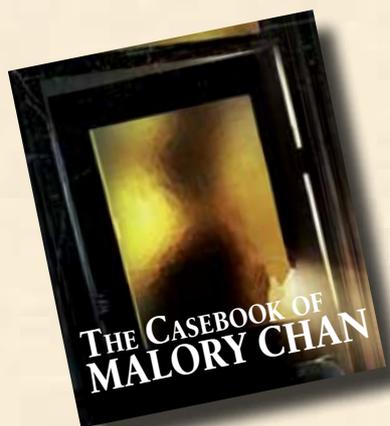
That was the second time I'd broken his nose. The first had been in Wing Chun class, when he was 16 and I was 14. He had not forgiven me then; I suspected his grudge might deepen now.

I glanced up at Lyla. She'd taken in the situation with a glance. Moose was gone, Tony immobilized. There was only Cyrinda to stop her getting away. Lyla began to slide out of the booth. Cyrinda grabbed Lyla's arm, but did not try to stop her. Instead she pulled Lyla out of the booth, and pushed her toward the door. Cyrinda wanted this girl away from Tony as much as I did. Lyla looked back at me gratefully. I jerked my head. *Go!* It was no picnic keeping Tony down. In a few steps she was through the door and free.

Tony was squirming. He'd gotten his arms free. I lifted, kept his legs in the air, putting all the weight on his neck and head.

The patrons of the swanky establishment had been shocked to stillness, but now a couple of men at nearby tables stood up uncertainly. One of them was the Chinese man, who had an intense and somehow familiar look. A minion of Tony's?

"Back off," I said. "This man is a wanted criminal."



They looked at each other and sat down.

But I was done with Tony. I let him drop and was at the door before he got to his feet. Cyrinda now was helping him up, saying “You ok, honey?”

I’d done it. I’d freed Lyla. I felt the exhilaration as I went through the door of the restaurant.

And ran smack into a huge fist.

I bounced off the bluestone wall by the door and stayed upright with difficulty. My head had cracked against the stone and I felt a trickle of blood on my neck. When my eyes cleared, I saw Moose standing in front of me. He was holding a battling Lyla with little effort. A black sedan was running at the curb, door open. I was still wobbly on my feet when Tony came through the door and hit me hard in the stomach. I doubled and fell. He kicked me in the ribs and I wanted to throw up. A police siren was approaching in the distance.

He bent over me where I lay on the ground.

“You want Lyla?” he said. His voice was nasally. “Fine. Get me the general’s head, I’ll let her go.” He kicked me again, and said “But you’re dead, Chan.” The police car screeched to a halt half a block behind us. “Just keep looking over your shoulder, herb man,” Tony added as he backed away and got into the car. I got to my feet and tried to appear natural as I limped down the street. I edged around the corner of an alley and stopped to hold my ribs. I shut my eyes in pain. All I could see there was Lyla’s face, turned towards me in the rear window of the black sedan as it sped up the street.

**T**HE CABLE CAR rocked gently back and forth, jolting my aching ribs each time. The breeze however was mild for autumn, and carried variously the smells of cooking, car exhaust and garbage. I was on my way to meet Jimmy and the brothers Neith as we had planned, but my thoughts were drawn to what I had seen just now at the restaurant. Tony Wu had something on Ed Carroll. Almost certainly it related to Tony’s smuggling operations. How Lyla came into it I did not know, but Tony was holding her for more than just leverage on the treasure.

Something nagged at my memory. Something about the restaurant scene was

trying to surface. What was it?

I couldn’t think, I could only feel.

Occasional beams of sunlight warmed my skin at the gaps between the buildings. I was exhausted. My head ached and my mind wandered.

*Kan, the Abyss; danger; the abysmal sign of the assassin’s blade. So many deaths.*

If I could save Lyla, if I could stop Tony Wu, would that bring my parents back? A deep chill congealed in my guts. I took a long breath and closed my eyes. Too many had died. My parents and the others in the Red Dragon massacre: only my father’s quick thinking and a hard shove had saved my life. Lamont, Jimmy’s co-worker, murdered in his apartment. My grandfather, unable to avenge the death of his daughter.

What had been that second hexagram? *Splitting Apart; Release.* Suddenly the nagging sensation in my memory became clear, and I knew who that Chinese man at the restaurant had been: it was Victor Fang, the archaeologist, the very man who had released this plague into the world several years before, unearthing the jade vessel at a dig in Hupeh. What in Hecate’s name was he doing at that restaurant, at this time?

I opened my eyes. This was my stop.

**T**HE DINER DOWN the street from my office was a far cry from the expensive restaurant where Tony had been. The smell of burgers, fresh coffee and cigarettes mixed with the clank of dishes and raucous banter among the familiar patrons. Jimmy, the brothers and I had just finished an early lunch.

An earth tremor made a sudden hush in the café, made us all look up and begin the silent count: *when it reached five it was the big one.* But this little quake had barely rattled the dishes before it was over. The banter resumed, on a higher note for a moment before settling.

“Hope Pa’s ok,” the tall slender brother called Button said. The brothers looked at each other.

Jimmy shifted uncomfortably. “You dudes need to go, just go. Mal and me’ll be fine by ourselves.”

They grinned. “Like hell,” Beanpole the fat brother answered. “Ain’t been a bad quake in Marin since before Pa was born. He’d tell us

”

*Kan, the Abyss; danger; the abysmal sign of the assassin’s blade. So many deaths.*

“

Sun Tzu had said:  
leave a way out, don't  
crowd a desperate  
enemy.

to worry 'bout our own selves.”

“And you, Jimmy. He'd flay us alive if he heard we'd left you and Mal in the lurch,” Latch said in his deep voice.

“Where's Phyllis?” I looked at my wrist. The watch was gone, lost. The restaurant? My ribs ached again at the memory of Tony Wu's kicks.

“There she is,” Jimmy said.

Phyllis scurried over to our booth, slid in, looked back toward the door, the whites of her eyes very big. Her face was pale. Jimmy and I exchanged glances: this was not like Phyllis: big, competent, bullying Phyllis.

“You ok, Phyl?” I began.

“Here, Mal, take it, whatever it is.” She slid the envelope across the table, pulled her hand away quickly. “I think I lost him.”

“Who?”

“A Chinese guy with scary eyes.” Phyllis dropped her head, seemed to reach within, then looked up.

“I'm taking the day off, Mal, going to my sister's.” There was no compromise in her voice. I felt relieved.

This was the Phyllis I knew.

**T**HE TRANSBAY TERMINAL was grey with tall windows. Dust motes rode high in shafts of light. In the almost empty waiting room, long wooden benches ran between art deco pillars. Now only a couple of derelicts stretched out on the hard wood. Our footsteps echoed as Jimmy and I made our way across the marble floor to the lockers, close to the glass doors on this side of the terminal. All seemed quiet.

Jimmy inserted the key and the locker opened. He removed an oblong parcel somewhat larger than a basketball, looked around, then shut the locker. We smiled at each other. That had been all too...

A metallic knocking made us look up. One of the “derelicts” stood not far away. He'd tapped the lockers with a small gun, which was now pointed at us. His face held the hint of a smile. The smile was not friendly. Another derelict appeared at his shoulder. As we straightened, three other young Chinese men stepped out from the baggage room. Their eyes were cold. Each held a weapon: iron nunchakus, a knife. The words from the *Yi Jing* flashed through my mind: *the assassin's blade*.

Jimmy and I stood with our backs to the lockers. I had the little flick-knife I'd taken off the thug two days before, but that was it. Jimmy was tough, but two against five was not good odds.

The man with the small gun—it looked like a .22—gestured with it at the parcel. Jimmy shook his head. They stepped closer. One of the men flicked out an extendable baton.

Jimmy raised the parcel above his head. The threat was clear: he would smash it before giving it up. The men stopped.

I pointed with my chin towards their right. They glanced that way. Beanpole, Button and Latch stood there, flanking their right and rear, but leaving an avenue of escape for them. That had been the plan. *Wai si wai kyut, kung kau wat bik*, Sun Tzu had said: leave a way out, don't crowd a desperate enemy.

Just then, through the glass doors behind them, I could see Tony Wu stepping out of a large black car. That had *not* been in the plan. He probably had Moose with him. This could be bad.

The Chinese man in front glanced back, saw Tony, and turned to us again with a leer. “Tony has been looking for this a long time,” he said. “Tony is not a patient man. It has been hard on us.”

He didn't know it, but it was going to get harder. As he turned back to face us, he had not seen what I just had: an old pickup truck veer crazily in front of the black car, two large men leap out, grab Tony, manhandle him into the pickup, then accelerate away with a squeal of tires. Where was Moose?

We all stood in tableau, the Chinese waiting for Tony to come through the doors and tell them what to do, and us waiting for them to find out he wouldn't.

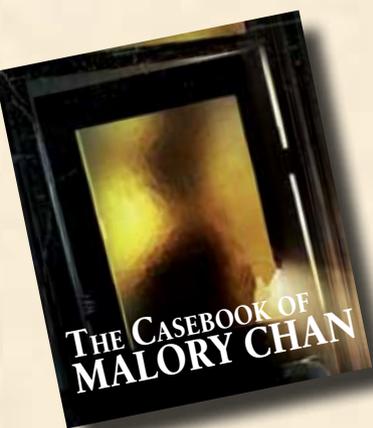
Finally I cleared my throat and gestured behind them.

The man in front looked back, cursed, then turned to face us again, taking a half step backwards.

“Tony chickened out when he saw who we were,” I lied. “But you look like tough boys. Why don't you give it a try?”

Confusion wreathed his face. The others were looking at each other.

Just at that moment Latch stepped forward, a hefty square mass, and opened his coat with his left hand. His right hand



hung loosely, the fingers moving slightly. The eyes of the Chinese all seemed drawn to something on his left hip. They looked at each other and backed off.

"Later, dudes. Count on it," the one in front said, pointing to us, just before they disappeared.

Latch turned, closing his coat, and smiled.

**"WE GOT IT!"** Jimmy exulted. I could still feel my heart pounding. The brothers' faces remained flushed with excitement. We'd retrieved the treasure and stymied a Triad heist, all without injury or even violence. Everything had gone according to plan. Jimmy turned the parcel in his hands.

He looked up and his eyes gleamed, a cold greed that made me recoil. He said, "I just gotta have a look." He carried the parcel into the baggage room, the brothers and I forgotten.

We followed, shut the door; Beanpole stood watch. Jimmy was already peeling away the thick brown paper wrapping like an onion. We gathered around, transfixed.

The inside layer was a thin sheet of soft paper, and already we could see the translucency of the jade which, when that final layer was slowly removed, seemed to glow with its own inner light. We held our breath. The carving of the jade vessel was simple and elegant. The golden outlines of the head held within could be perceived by us all, such was the rare delicacy of the jade surrounding it.

We gazed at this treasure in silence, time seeming to have stopped. Finally Beanpole by the door cleared his throat.

"This place ain't safe," he said.

Jimmy looked up in a panic. His eyes lit upon us and seemed to calm: he needed us again. "We'd better get this to your office, Mal," he said.

It was as good a place as any.

**WE LOOKED AROUND** cautiously as we left the terminal but there was no sign of Tony's boys lying in ambush. We found the old car and Latch drove us to my office, where he had to stop in the middle of the street to let us out. "I'll find a parking spot," he said, and drove off.

My office building was one of those



traditional affairs where a solid door led into a vestibule from which both stairs and an elevator led to the upper floors.

The round Beanpole entered the building first. The door slammed behind him before we could follow. There was a thump like a grocer dropping a sack of potatoes. The rest of us looked at each other. Button, the tall one, frowned and pushed at the door. It opened easily and he stuck his head in. His feet suddenly left the ground as he was pulled horizontally in through the door. Another thump.

Jimmy and I had just begun to back away when out of the door came a pale girl with very black hair in a pageboy cut. It was Cyrinda. The next two things we saw came out together: a large head and a pistol. That was Moose. The rest of him came out and stood solidly, the big gun looking like a toy in his huge hand. We froze.

"Ok, hand it over," the pale girl said. "I don't know what it is, but Tony's desperate for this thing."

Jimmy turned to run. Moose took a single step and laid a hand on his shoulder. It was like Jimmy had suddenly developed a crushing deformity. Moose stuck the gun in his ear and Jimmy handed the parcel over to Cyrinda. She hefted the heavy package in her hands, gloating.

"What good is this thing to you, Cyrinda?" I said. I was stalling, trying to make time for Latch to return from parking the car. "You can't use it, you can't sell it."

"I just want to show Tony I'm better than little Miss Sunshine," she sneered. "What can she do but wring her perfect hands, eh Moose?"

The big man's hard face seemed to soften when he looked at her, but the only verbal response was a grunt.

He let go of Jimmy, who staggered; I

“

There was a thump like a grocer dropping a sack of potatoes.

grabbed his arm. Moose held the gun on us. We could only watch as Cyrinda turned and walked the precious package away, struggling slightly with the weight. She rounded the corner and disappeared. Moose stood for a moment, glancing up the street until sure she was clear, then put up the gun, smiled a crooked-toothed smile, and said in a deep voice “Later, dudes.”

“Count on it,” I said, but the conviction was just not there.

**U**P IN MY OFFICE, Jimmy, Button and I sat rubbing liniment on our bruises. The short fat brother, Beanpole, wandered around opening up herb drawers, leaning over, sniffing and pulling back with a disgusted look on his face. Finally he went to the kitchen to make coffee.

The mood was glum. Jimmy brooded, silent. Latch blamed himself. “I should’ve just double-parked.”

“And get towed? Nah, it ain’t your fault, Latch.”

Button tried to cheer up his brother. “You would have loved the gun, Latch. A Heckler & Koch VP70.”

Latch looked interested. “The holster turns into a stock for the shoulder, right?”

Beanpole came in carrying a tray loaded with mugs of coffee, handed them around.

“Yep,” Button said. “9 mm. 18 round mag. Thanks, Bean. Made of polymer, they say.”

“Huh. A plastic gun. Thanks, Beany. Don’t think I’ve ever seen one of those, ’cept in the magazines.”

My memory stirred. Plastic gun? Where had I heard that before? I took the proffered coffee absently.

“Hey, let’s focus,” Jimmy said. “We have to get my jade vase back.”

The brothers and I exchanged looks. None of us had missed the possessive pronoun.

“Focus on what?” Button replied. “The vase is gone.”

“Let’s forget the vase,” I said. There were shocked looks.

“Like Sun Tzu says,” I explained. “*Chat kei bat yi*: do the unexpected. I mean, focus on something else, such as: where is Tony?”

I looked around at them. “After all, if Cyrina wants to give the vase to Tony she’ll have to find him, right? If we find him first, we can set up an ambush.”

And I’d have a better chance of helping Lyla escape, I thought silently.

Jimmy got excited. “Yeah! Ok, let’s see. You said two guys in a pickup nabbed Tony. That was probably Mick and Sal.”

“So where would they take him?” I said. “They’d want someplace quiet, no interruptions.”

Jimmy sat up. “If that’s the case, I can think of a coupla spots they might’ve gone.”

“We’re going to have to split up,” I said.

**I** ARRIVED AT THE FACTORY warehouse in the late afternoon. This had seemed the least likely to them, and so Jimmy and the brothers were checking out the others. I’d had a feeling about this place, though. Until I saw it.

It was desolate. Dried thorns blew here and there over the deserted lot within a chain link fence. The windows that were not broken were grey with dust in their rusted frames. There was no activity. How could Tony be here?

I clambered up the fence and dropped down the other side, then edged along the side of the building. Half-way around the back a small door stood half ajar. It creaked when I opened it, and I cringed, but there was no movement from inside. I went into a dark space that looked like an abandoned office. I left a mark in the dust on a desk, in case Jimmy or the brothers came along. An inner door of the office led to a passageway, and I could detect, at the far end of the passage, an oblong of light. Shadows moved within the illumination. I crept forward until I could see what was going on.

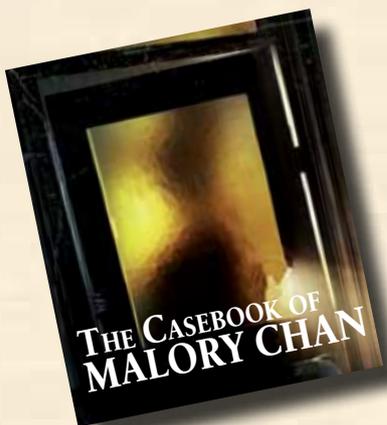
The warehouse opened out into a large space. There was fading light through the small windows up close to the roof, but down here all was murk, except for a small lighted circle from a standing lamp in the middle of the floor.

The light was centred on a man, and the man was tied to a chair. Dim shapes stood around him. It was Tony Wu in the chair.

“You guys really don’t know who I am?” He shook his head. “You small fry in big wok, and oil spitting hot.”

That last phrase sounded better in Cantonese, but Tony was tired and he’d lost his cultivated accent.

A tall shape came up the passageway



in the darkness and settled in beside me. It was Button. "So you were right," he whispered. I motioned him to silence.

"I don't care if you're the mayor's boyfriend," we heard Joe Lashinki's deep rumble. "My union gets a cut of whatever you were smuggling in."

"Business as usual." That was Mick, with his Irish drawl.

"Yeah, kid pro crow," another voice agreed. "You scratch my back, I wash yours, is what that means."

I rolled my eyes. That had to be Sal.

"You'll get your cut, but you won't like it," said Tony. There was the sound of a solid smack. Tony spat, a red splash hit the floor.

My breathing quickened; something had just occurred to me, a memory. The Triad boss Wong Lung Tao told me my parent's killer had used an unusual gun. Now I remembered what it was: the H&K VP-70, the same one Moose used at my office building. Was Moose my parent's murderer? Tony would know for sure, and he was sitting right out there.

I straightened up. Button grabbed my arm, but I shook off his hand and walked out into the space. "So you found him, Joe. Any luck?"

Joe Lashinski turned his large body towards me. "Oh, it's you." He gestured towards Tony. "So much for your hot tip. This guy's worthless. All that trouble and nothing."

"Maybe if we'd got him earlier, if that big guy hadn't been there," said Mick.

"It's a mute point now," said Sal, nodding

at Tony. Joe was looking at me curiously. "But what are you doing here? How'd you know where ..."

Just then Jimmy came running in. "Triads," he shouted. "Lots ..." and something flew from the darkness behind, hitting him in the head and knocking him flat.

I saw Tony throw himself and his chair sideways, knocking the light over. Running shapes filled the murk. I ducked and turned until my back was up against one of the wooden pillars holding up the roof. It was total chaos. I countered a swing to my head with a straight chop to the throat. The man went down, gurgling. A short boy dove for my legs, aiming for a football tackle. What he got was my knee in the face. I felt his teeth go. I could smell the fear and adrenalin, could taste my own sweat, and then blood as someone connected with my head and cut open my eyebrow. I heard a crack and felt my left arm go numb. A baseball bat clattered to the floor, and Jimmy stood over the person who'd hit me. He grinned at me, then was swept away into the gloom by a thrusting knot of struggling men. It had only been a couple of minutes, but I was panting like a marathon. Shots rang out here and there. Sirens sounded in the distance. Holding my injured arm, I glanced over and saw the chair on its side was empty, ropes cut and hanging. Tony was gone!

I saw a square of light appear in the far wall, then flick out: a door had opened and closed. I ran for it. On the way out a big man struck a deep kung-fu stance facing me side on; I swept his front leg out from under him and went over him as he fell.

I got to the door and opened it but was blinded by the rays of the setting sun outside. Through my squinted eyes I saw a yellow Mustang fish-tailing it out of the lot, spitting up gravel and dust behind it, and turning left up the street.

To my right was a familiar shape: Mick's pickup. My left arm was useless, but the keys were there. It was two blocks before I caught sight of the Mustang. I kept with him, three cars back, until I lost him after Broderick and Jefferson.

There were only a few streets until the water, so I cruised around until I saw the yellow Mustang parked crookedly by a fire hydrant on Divisadero, the door hanging



open. A light went on in the building next to it, on the top floor. I parked the pickup in a driveway and went to have a look.

It was four stories. A fire escape led up the outside, with one of those supposedly burglar-proof lower sections of ladder that retracted upward out of reach.

Out of reach, that is, unless someone left a row of trash cans lined up below, behind a thorn hedge that circled the building.

Thorns. *Thorns surrounding a prison.* This is what the hexagram had described.

I slipped around the hedge, stood on one of the trash cans and leapt awkwardly, one-handedly, for the lower rung. The can crashed to its side below but I hung on for grim death with my right arm. The section of fire escape eased to the ground. I went quickly up it.

At the third floor platform I slowed, and climbed the last section of ladder cautiously, making as little noise as possible. I could hear loud voices from the other side of the window. I raised my head and looked through, keeping hidden. The window was half open.

Tony was slapping Cyrinda. Lyla cowered in a corner. She had what looked to be cigarette burns up her arm.

Cyrinda broke free from Tony, ran to a satchel, and turned back with a pistol. It was the same one Moose had used when they snatched the head at my office. She had to hold it with two hands.

Tony looked at Moose, his bodyguard. "Take care of her, Moose. Just don't mess her up like you did with that black kid."

So Moose killed Lamont! The big man took a step forward. "Come on Cy, you don't want to do that," he said. "Just hand me the gun."

"Step aside, Moose. Don't get between me and this two-timer." Cyrinda flicked off the safety. She was no stranger to handling guns.

Even through the window I could see the confusion on Moose's face. Years of loyalty to Tony warred with his affection for Cyrinda, forbidden as it was. He moved to take a step, but stopped when she said "I'm warning you, Moose." Her voice was deadly. Her finger slipped from the guard to the trigger.

He shook his massive head, but the loyalty won out. He took the step forward. The gun

roared. Moose crumpled, the hurt in his eyes dragging at Cyrinda as he fell. Her face was an anguished mask as she watched the big man die there on the floor.

Tony moved to grab the gun while her eyes were on Moose, but she backed away and levelled the pistol. He stopped abruptly.

"You made me do this, Tony. I should kill you just for that. And here I was going to make you a fine present," Cyrinda said. Her face was shiny with tears but she laughed bitterly. "The thing you've been looking for all this time, the thing you'd do anything to get. Or would you rather have her?" She gestured with her chin at Lyla. "Make your choice, Tony."

His eyes widened. "What? You have the jade vase?"

Cyrinda nodded, very slowly.

Tony looked at Lyla, licked his lips indecisively, then looked back at Cyrinda. His face changed. "Hey, babe," he said, lifting his hands and smiling. "You know you're the only one I care about. Why don't you just give me the vase and we'll get out of here."

"And her?" Cyrinda said, flicking her eyes toward Lyla.

"Whatever you like," Tony said.

Lyla whimpered.

"Shaddup, tramp!" Cyrinda turned the gun on Lyla, and Tony jumped her, wringing the pistol from her hand. At the same time I flung the window open and crashed through, landing sideways on the floor. Pain shot up my left arm, blinded me with its intensity.

"Mal!" Lyla cried. I opened my eyes.

Tony had backed up, holding the gun aimed at us. "Well, that's what I like to see," he said, still breathing heavily. "They'll say you killed Cyrinda, Mal, then killed yourself." He smiled. "Lyla and I will be long gone." I glanced at her. She was staring at Tony, revulsion and terror on her face. Tony's cruel laugh jerked my gaze back to him. "And you know the funny thing, Mal?" he said. "This pistol killed your parents. It should have killed you there at the Red Dragon."

I pushed myself to my knees, wincing at the pain in my arm. "Well, you've had enough tries, anyway, Tony. You keep missing."

"Huh? What you talking about?" Tony's cocky smile became slightly puzzled.

"Remember shooting up the Green Stream restaurant? What if I'd come out with Wong

”

*A big man struck a deep kung-fu stance facing me side on; I swept his front leg out from under him and went over him as he fell.*



Lung Tao? There would have been a Tong war.”

“The Green Stream? What’ya mean?”  
He sounded genuinely confused.

“And the ferry? Throwing me off the ferry? Bet you were surprised to see me back after that one.”

“I got no idea ...” he shook his head, frowning. The gun dropped slightly.

A shot came from the doorway, catching Tony and spinning him around, the gun falling from his hand as he collapsed. Cyrinda gave a cry and ran to him.

Victor Fang, the archeologist, moved slowly into the room, keeping a revolver pointed at Cyrinda as she cradled Tony in her arms. He looked down at me.

“That wasn’t Tony,” he said. “That was me. I thought you were in it with him. I was just trying to scare you, at first. I regretted telling Lyla about the head of General Guan Yu. I guess I’d been bragging a little.” He gave a quick glance at Lyla, eyelids slightly lowered. “Anyway, I followed her to lunch with you, and afterwards saw Tony Wu sweet-talk her into his car. I thought you were his accomplice. Then you came to me with threats.” He smiled grimly. “I only got serious after that.”

I was still on my knees, subject to this villain. I had a bitter taste in my mouth and a burning in my chest. Taking my time, I rose to my feet.

Victor Fang’s eyes regarded me with interest. “If I were you, I would stop right there, Mr Chan.” His lips curled in a tiny smirk. “You may not be working for Tony Wu, but as I said before,” he hefted the revolver, “I really do have no need for an herbalist.” His face became serious. “I want the jade vase and that’s it. There is no need for anyone else to get hurt.”

That’s how he saw it. My Irish side saw it differently. Here was the guy who’d been trying to kill me, time and time again. I shook my head. If I let him just walk away, I couldn’t live with myself. There is such a thing as self-respect.

But then there was Lyla.

“It’s in the satchel,” I said, gesturing with my good arm at the bag on the other side of the room, where Cyrinda had found the big pistol. “Lyla, why don’t you show him.”

A sharp lift to his head and he focused

on the satchel. Lyla started moving towards it, but I leapt for Victor Fang. He swung the revolver towards me and fired. I felt a burning pain crease my side like the slash of a sword. I chopped down, knocking the gun from his hand. With the same movement, bouncing off his wrist, I drove the space between my thumb and forefinger into his throat. With my leg behind his, he went over and down.

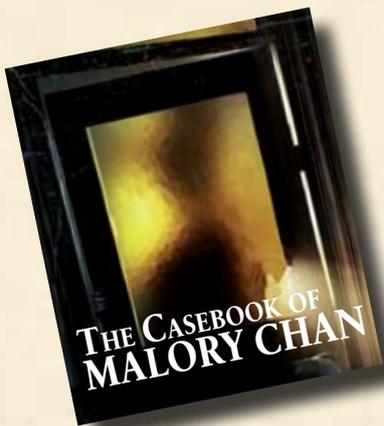
Before he landed I twisted and kicked the revolver away from Cyrinda’s hand. I’d heard her scrabbling for it behind me. The revolver skittered across the floor, hit the wall under the window. She pulled back her hand, and looked at me, eyes burning. Then with a little shrug she turned back to Tony. His face was pale. She stroked it.

I glanced over at Lyla. She’d backed up against the wall when she heard the shot and her eyes were wide and wild. In her hands was a parcel a little bigger than a basketball.

That’s when time slowed but events seemed to speed. The building started to rumble, the floors to shake. I moved toward the window, began the count: *one* ... the rumble grew louder ... *two*... everything was still shaking, plaster falling ... *three* ... “Come on,” I yelled to Lyla. She took a few steps in my direction, then lost her footing as the building tilted wildly; the parcel flew up in the air. I saw Victor Fang, on his feet now, rushing forward, intercepting the parcel. All I cared about was Lyla. I grabbed her hand, pulled her towards the fire escape. The structure collapsed around us. We braced ourselves in the frame of the window as a feeling of weightlessness ended in a riveting thump. Cyrinda was still holding Tony when they disappeared through the floor. Slowly we realised the shaking had stopped. All the air was dust, and an eerie silence. There was blood on Lyla’s face, her hair matted with bits of ceiling. We turned towards the outside, then looked again at each other in wonder; our window was now only a few feet above the ground. The three stories below us had pancaked.

I helped Lyla climb down and we brushed ourselves off. She turned to me, a worried look in her eye. “Mal, you smell that?”

It was gas; a main had ruptured somewhere.



Somewhere close.

We ran out into the road as the building exploded behind us.

“MY SLEEP IS much better from your herbs, young Wai Jing,” said Wong Lung Tao. I had given him *Xue Fu Zhu Yu Tang* (Drive Out Stasis from the Mansion of Blood Decoction) when the usual calming formulas did not work. We were again in the room at the rear of the Green Stream Restaurant. The old Triad leader had retired, but was still a powerful influence in the city, and retained his title of Lung Tao: Dragon Head.

He toyed with the teacup on the table before him, then looked up at me. “And I hear you have avenged the death of your parents.”

“Well, I solved the mystery, anyway, Lung Tao.” From a well-deep place inside me, a thought emerged: now, at last, they can rest in peace.

“And this treasure, the jade vessel containing the head of General Guan Yu?”

“It disappeared, Lung Tao, along with the scholar. Maybe swallowed by the earthquake.”

The old man smiled and said nothing.

Suddenly I recalled the second *Yi Jing* hexagram: *Splitting Apart*. The earthquake! And the other phrase: “A jar, passed through a window.” Had the scholar escaped with the vessel?

I narrowed my eyes, leaned forward, and said with soft urgency, “Have you heard something, Lung Tao?”

“Let us just say that there has been a spate of killings in Shanghai.”

“Guan Yu is the God of War,” I said, sitting back and shifting my left arm in its sling. With the other hand I reached for my teacup, took a sip.

Wong Lung Tao smiled. “Indeed. But what about your friends?”

“Jimmy is back on the docks,” I said. “He missed his chance at the treasure but he seems to be happier, in any case. His friends from Marin got out of the hospital only a few days after the fight at the factory.”

“And the girl?”

“Her information about corruption in the Board of Supervisors caused a lot of resignations.”

I could detect a hint of sly amusement

on the old man’s face. It had not been his Tong involved in the bribing and blackmail scandal. “What happened to her?” he asked.

“She is waiting outside for me, Lung Tao.”

“Then you should go.”

I stood up, bowed, and was about to pass through the curtains that kept the room private when Wong Lung Tao called to me softly. I turned my head, and he said in a low voice: “You know, you remind me of your grandfather, Wai Jing.”

I hesitated, gave him a small nod, and turned again towards the outside.

Lyla was sitting at a small table, laughing and talking with the owner, Louie Chee. When he saw me coming he grinned, winked and went back into the kitchen. Lyla stood up. She had recovered well from her kidnapping; only a small scar on her forehead still showed.

I slipped my arm around her waist and we went out the door.

On the sidewalk, we walked along hand in hand, saying nothing. It was a beautiful day in San Francisco, sunny with a slight cool breeze. Every so often Lyla stole a glance at me. There was a hint of perfume. I took a deep breath, intoxicated. After a block she said “Mal, you know I am beginning to have my doubts about your detecting skills.” Her pouting lips held a smile.

“Yes?”

“And your ability to diagnose.”

“Don’t be so sure about that,” I said.

I glanced up and down the street then pulled her into a vacant doorway.

“Whatever are you doing?” she said. Her blue eyes danced with excitement.

“Giving you the treatment you need,” I said, and kissed her.

