

CHAPTER

1

Hong Kong

The little car hit a speed bump and hurtled through the air like a shoulder-fired missile. Landing in a spray of glass and broken plastic, it shattered a motor mount and kept going. Two blocks later, as it took flight and slammed back to earth once more, its bent frame groaned like a stabbing victim. Despite all of its damage, the autonomous taxi continued at breakneck speed.

Screaming down the precipitous incline of Hong Kong's Central District, the wind tore at its flimsy shell. As its tires clawed for purchase on the slick asphalt, they unfurled tendrils of hot smoke. Trailing behind, three police cruisers slalomed wildly through the early morning traffic, struggling to keep up.

Horns blared. Klaxons wailed. Wide-eyed pedestrians scattered for cover like startled birds. The madness was only two minutes old, yet the radios crackled with urgency as patrol cars swarmed in from every direction.

With a roar from its engine, an unmarked sedan lurched into the fray, closing the gap quickly with the rogue taxi. Riding shotgun, Captain Ronny Tang of China's Ministry of State Security, or MSS for short, wished he had eaten a milder breakfast. The *mi xian* was twice as spicy coming up as it had been going down.

Using one hand to brace himself against the dashboard, he used

his other to work the radio and bark commands. Everything was unraveling.

“Faster!” he yelled at his driver.

The man they had spent weeks tracking was finally making his move. All Tang needed to do was to arrest him. But as he moved to apprehend their target, the unexpected had happened—the man had bolted from his hotel. And he hadn’t been alone. An unidentified woman accompanied him, adding a layer of mystery to the situation.

At first the woman seemed like a minor hitch, a solvable complication. Then the autonomous taxi had shot straight into the morning rush.

How the hell is that possible? Tang asked himself in disbelief. There was no way the target could have commandeered the driverless taxi. By design, a thick Plexiglas divider cut off access to the front seat.

The alternative possibility was just as crazy—that the car had, of its own volition, gone full-on Formula 1. It had to be ignoring every preprogrammed safety protocol as it traded paint with countless cars and trams as it pinballed downhill.

He looked ahead and watched a police motorcycle accelerate and catch up. The little car braked suddenly and swerved, clipping its front wheel. The bike tumbled to the pavement and its rider went cartwheeling into a curb. The taxi flew into the next intersection, narrowly missing a delivery boy on a scooter. As soon as it was through, the light changed to red.

Tang’s driver slammed on the brakes.

“No, no! Keep going!” the captain shouted.

The driver tried to comply, but a bus careened out in front of them. With a last-second jerk on the wheel, they merely sideswiped the bus’s front bumper. In a crunch of grating metal, the sedan ricocheted off and kept going.

The captain tried to work the radio, desperate for all the reinforcements he could muster, but he could barely key the microphone as his body was thrown left and right.

“Don’t lose sight of him!”

As it turned out, additional radio calls were unnecessary. A massive response had already been initiated by headquarters. Every police car in the district was converging on their quarry, a chorus of sirens that

could be heard from miles away. Military units, which had been on alert since last night, were descending from all quarters. Navy patrol boats were locking down the harbor, a ground stop had been ordered at Hong Kong International Airport, and helicopters swirled overhead.

Three blocks ahead a roadblock was hurriedly established. Two rows of eight cars, fronted by spike strips, impeded every inch of road and sidewalk. Backing all of it up were a pair of ZFB-05 armored personnel carriers. It would be absolutely impenetrable. With the streets lined by skyscrapers on either side, and multiple cars in pursuit, the driverless taxi was rocketing toward a box canyon of concrete, glass, and armor.

You won't be running much longer, Tang thought.

The taxi's sensors were on overload. Radar, GPS, cameras, computers: All were working in unison, yet in a way the designers could never have imagined. Safety was no longer paramount. The overriding function had become speed. Two passengers in the back seat held on for their lives, clutching handholds in a death grip as they watched the steering wheel spin ghostlike through onrushing traffic.

As the final intersection before the roadblock neared, a twenty-car-deep traffic jam loomed. The autonomous taxi never slowed for the sea of brake lights. It bounded up over a curb and onto the sidewalk. Pedestrians threw themselves clear and shopping bags went flying. The car plowed over a trash can, clipped two streetlights, and decapitated a fire hydrant. A food cart exploded in a spray of particleboard, candy, and grilled sweet potatoes; the wreckage was soaked immediately by the geyser from the broken fireplug.

By some combination of good luck and technology, not a single person was run down.

As the taxi approached the intersection, the roadblock was not yet in sight. Even so, by some digital prescience, the car sensed the dead end. It swerved left at the corner, its tires smoking through another skid before getting back on track and disappearing.

Tang cursed. "Left. Left!"

"I see him!"

The MSS car rounded the turn trailing by only half a block. At the next intersection the taxi swung hard right and sped downhill. The waterfront loomed ahead.

At each of the next three intersections the pattern repeated. Each time the autonomous taxi flew past, the light changed to red and traffic swept in. Patrol cars joined the chase from all directions, braking and skidding. The end result was nothing short of a demolition derby, auto parts and glass littering the road like a trail of mechanized breadcrumbs.

The taxi neared the waterfront, but instead of turning onto the shoreside road, it crashed straight through a fence and swerved onto the wharf. Dozens of police cruisers and MSS cars followed through the jagged breach. For the pursuers, this simplified their geometry. Patrol cars maneuvered to outflank their quarry, sealing off the only two escape routes. Seconds later, the taxi hit a patch of oil, slewed into a spin, and slammed into a shipping container with a sickening crunch.

Finally, the car had been stopped. One side was crumpled, and the left front wheel was bent severely. Its off-white paint scheme had gone to a virtual rainbow from collision damage.

Squad cars immediately surrounded the taxi, forming a semicircle at a safe distance. Nervous officers bailed out. They drew their weapons and took cover behind doors and quarter panels. Everyone had seen these kinds of car chases on TV, in lawless places like California, but such pursuits in the People's Republic were a rarity.

Captain Tang's sedan, dented and spewing steam from its radiator, wheezed to a stop behind them. Three more unmarked MSS cars arrived and a dozen men spilled out onto the wharf's scarred asphalt. The autonomous taxi was contained. Still, given the chaos of the last ten minutes, no one knew what to expect. *Are the suspects in the car armed?*

Everyone looked to Tang for guidance.

To his credit, he kept calm. At the warehouse behind them, workers were gathering in a doorway. Two forklift operators paused to gawk. A crowd was forming near the breached wire fence. This prompted the captain's first order. He dispatched a dozen police officers to push the onlookers away.

More reinforcements soon arrived, a group of men in full tactical gear who were trained in dispersing crowds. They went to work with shields and batons, clearing the wharf of potential witnesses.

With the scene under control, Tang strode toward the driverless taxi. Five MSS men fell in behind him. The scent of scorched rubber stained the salty breeze. He wrenched open the dented rear door, reached in, and dragged the passengers out one at a time. Both ended up sprawled on the oily tarmac. One was a middle-aged Chinese man in rumpled business attire, the other a black-haired young woman in a sheer blouse, pencil skirt, and stiletto heels.

The man hauled himself up to his feet, indignance in his scowl. He straightened his coat, stared at the captain, and said with all the authority he could muster, "Do you know who I am?"

Amped-up on adrenaline, and frustrated by the turn of events, Tang answered by punching him squarely in the mouth. The blow was more forceful than it needed to be, and the man fell on his ass. He sat stunned and immobilized, blood pouring from his mouth. Two front teeth appeared to be loose. The woman on the ground next to him looked petrified.

Tang leaned into the taxi. He searched the back seat but didn't see what they were after. He ordered his men to tear it apart. Two raked over the interior. Another used a crowbar to pry open the damaged trunk. Their only find: a silk purse containing a few toiletries.

Tang told them to keep looking.

His men searched the suspects roughly, turning out their pockets and tossing the meager contents on the ground. The car's seats were ripped out and every compartment was checked.

After ten minutes, two things seemed clear. First was that the object of their search wasn't here. The second, and more nuanced realization, involved the man on the ground. As he sat moaning and holding a bloody rag to his mouth, the captain suspected he might have made a terrible mistake.

CHAPTER

2

Beijing

A white-hot jolt lanced through Zhang Tao's face, splitting his skull in two from temple to jaw. It was the trigeminal neuralgia again, the vicious antagonist that mocked him with its unpredictability.

Considered one of the most painful ailments on the planet, the so-called "suicide disease" was a souvenir from a long-ago interrogation gone wrong. It was characterized by a searing pain along the trigeminal nerve, which was responsible for sensation in the face. The intensely acute attacks could last for seconds, minutes, or even hours.

His only relief was via an anticonvulsant drug known as Tegretol. It worked by decreasing the nerve impulses that caused seizures and pain. He was already taking 150 percent of the maximum allowable dosage.

The side effects were brutal. In addition to hair loss, the forty-five-year-old was in a constant state of fatigue and plagued by mouth sores. But his problems didn't end there.

He was chief of the Seventh Bureau of the Ministry of State Security, responsible for counterintelligence throughout the People's Republic. It was a position that demanded a certain amount of paranoia. However, Zhang's suspicion of others had morphed into something far more troubling. He was having trouble thinking clearly, had begun isolating himself, and was experiencing early warning signs of psychosis. He shared none of this, of course, with his colleagues.

The mere suggestion of illness would draw unwanted attention—in over twenty years at the ministry, he had made more than his fair share of enemies, and he couldn't afford to show any sign of weakness. Now, as he surveyed the sea of monitors sprawled across the MSS operations center—virtually all of which were tuned to the disaster on the wharf—a mounting sense of dread clawed into his gut.

He had coordinated an overwhelming response. Every available Hong Kong police and MSS unit had converged on the waterfront. Military helicopters continued to swarm overhead like angry wasps. In the background, two Navy corvettes were blockading the pier where the little car lay shattered and spent, its doors flung open and smoke drifting from the wheel wells. No one could accuse Zhang of not using all the assets at his disposal. In his capacity as chief of the Seventh Bureau, he wielded the virtually limitless power of the MSS. Yet the weight of that authority suddenly felt like a noose tightening around his neck.

If Dr. Chen Li, and more important, the item he carried, had somehow vanished into the tangled streets of Hong Kong, it wouldn't just be Zhang's career on the line. His freedom, and even his life, would be on the chopping block.

"Who are they?" Zhang demanded, his voice booming through the cavernous room. He was fixated on the central screen that displayed cell phone photos of the couple who had been dragged out of the taxi. The man was definitely not Chen. The woman was also unknown.

"Facial recognition is running," an analyst piped up from a nearby workstation.

Zhang drummed his index finger against the back of a wheeled chair as his gaze locked on a real-time video feed of the taxi. The stream was sourced from a dash camera on one of the MSS vehicles. His men were tearing the car apart. The seats had been shredded and floor mats lay strewn on the ground. The meager contents of the trunk, a few tire-changing tools and a rubber mat, had been thrown out onto the tarmac.

In the foreground, Captain Tang, the on-scene commander, stood beside the ravaged car. There was defeat in his posture as he raised his phone to place a call. His broad shoulders, usually set with military

rigidity, slumped in discomfiture. The phone pressed to his ear looked inordinately heavy.

Zhang's hand shot out, snatching the receiver from the cradle the instant the first ring registered—a silent but forceful message to Tang that his every move was being scrutinized, his failure amplified.

“Well?” he barked. His voice was tight, suppressing his growing panic.

“It's not here, boss,” said Tang. “And it's definitely not Chen.”

Zhang slammed his fist on the desk. “That's useless information, Tang! Did you find the trackers? The techs put two on Chen—one in his right shoe and another in his overcoat. Both are pinging from the damned taxi.”

“Negative, sir. We can't locate them anywhere.”

Zhang looked up at the tracking display and saw the twin blue dots glowing brightly, mocking him. “But they're showing right there!”

“We've double-checked the suspects and have practically stripped the car down to the frame. Sir, we've come up empty.”

Ignoring Tang for a moment, the counterintelligence chief's eyes darted to a single red dot blinking near the blue ones. “What about Chen's phone? It should be in the car as well.”

“Both of the subjects were carrying phones,” Tang reported, “but neither is the one we've been tracking.”

On another screen, he saw the suspects sitting on the ground in handcuffs, their backs against the fender of a police sedan. The woman, young and expensively dressed, had calmed considerably since getting out of the car. Whoever she was, this wasn't her first tangle with the law. The man, clutching a bloody rag to his mouth, triggered a flicker of recognition in Zhang. He couldn't place him either, but a terrible sense of unease was beginning to raise the hair on the back of his neck.

He bypassed asking Tang about identities. Anything these two offered up, documents or words, could not be trusted. Facial recognition would give them an answer soon enough.

“And the hotel?” Zhang asked. The autonomous taxi had picked up its two occupants at the Landmark Hong Kong, one of the most exclusive establishments in a city that knew luxury.

“We have identified the room. Teams are going over it, but so far there is no sign of either Chen or the device.”

Zhang gripped the handset like he might crush it. “Keep searching,” he ordered and slammed the phone down on its cradle.

Three weeks. Three grueling weeks they’d spent tailing Dr. Chen Li—ever since he had used a burner phone to make contact with a female CIA officer.

All directors of scientific programs were monitored in the People’s Republic, but Chen’s recent behavior had brought the watchfulness to a new level.

Chen was the linchpin of China’s most classified military project. For nearly a decade, vast national resources had been invested in his game-changing technology, a force multiplier that would allow China’s military to leapfrog their Western counterparts.

When alarm bells began sounding at the very top of the regime, Zhang had convinced his superiors to let him run Chen under tight surveillance. The counterintelligence chief’s reasoning was twofold. One, if China could arrest a CIA officer along with Chen, it would provide a valuable bargaining chip. Two, by putting Chen on a short leash, they would have time to do a full assessment of the breach and perform any necessary damage control.

Now they had lost track of not only Chen, but also the secrets in his possession.

“We have positive IDs on the suspects!” a nearby analyst announced, cutting through Zhang’s churning thoughts. “The man is Luo Sheng. He is—”

“Luo Sheng!” Zhang snapped, the name a punch in the gut. His earlier flicker of recognition, a vague unease, transitioned into full-blown panic. “And the woman?”

“Guan Fei,” the analyst replied. “Unemployed. Two arrests last year for prostitution.”

Ever so slowly, the landscape of the last twelve hours began to take on a dreadful new light. The way Chen had abruptly booked a room at the Landmark. The wayward blue dots. An errant track on his phone. Fearful of spooking the scientist, or worse, the CIA, Zhang had relied heavily on electronic surveillance. There had always been foot teams on the perimeter, just out of sight, but for long periods, including last night, they hadn’t had eyes directly on their target.

Only now did Zhang realize his fatal error. The man they had

been tracking, the man entrusted to lead China's most classified project, had been two steps ahead all along. They had been manipulated, played for fools.

On top of it all, his team had just chased down China's minister of culture and tourism and a whore he'd been having a tryst with. Then the leader of the team had punched the minister in the mouth.

Dr. Chen Li had them chasing ghosts.

"So where the fuck are you, Chen?" Zhang hissed, the pain in his face intensifying as his question hung in the air of the operations center like a curse.