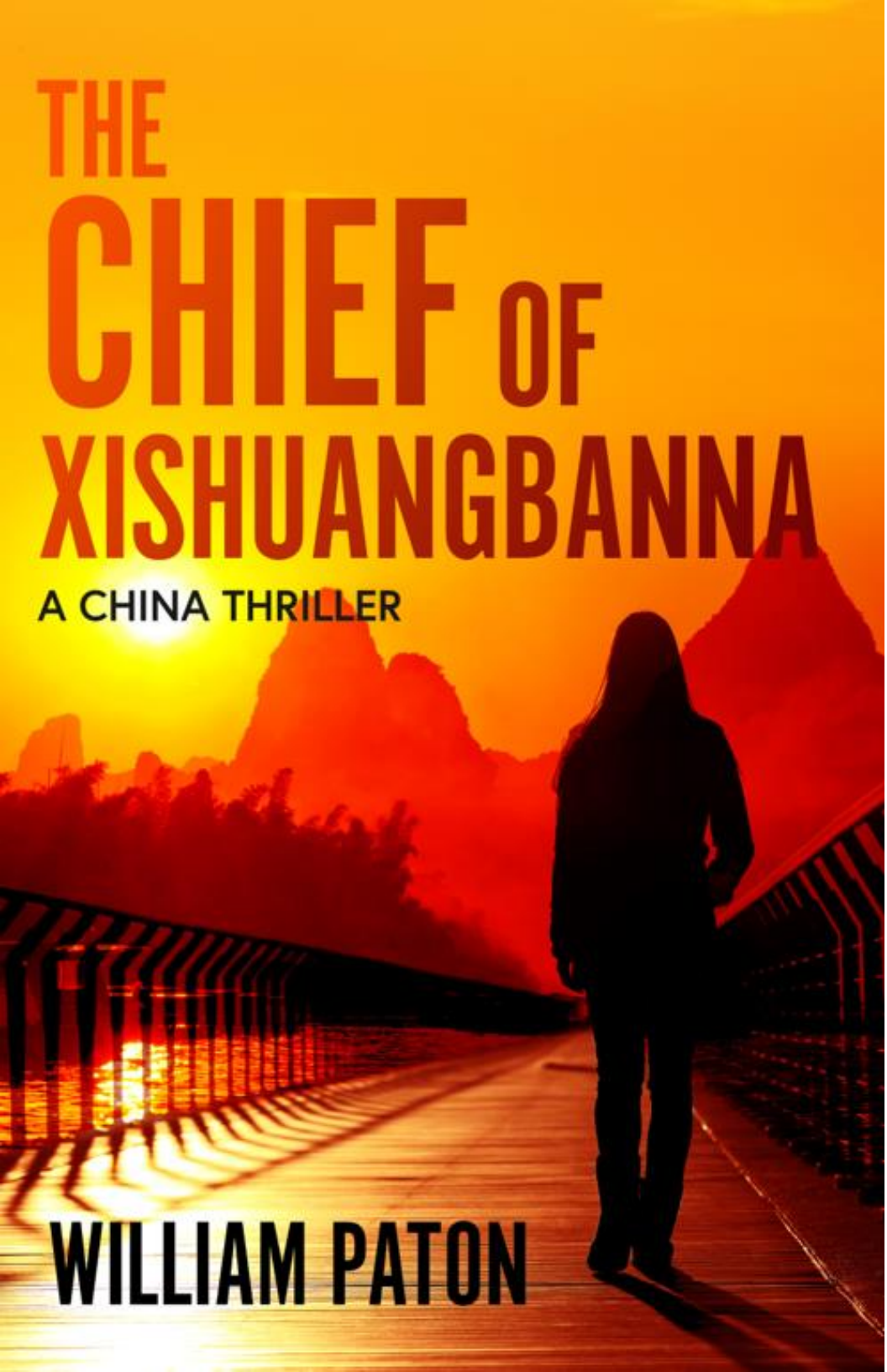


# THE CHIEF OF XISHUANGBANNA

A CHINA THRILLER

**WILLIAM PATON**



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## Prologue

It has rained and the tropical forest is dripping. A small man in loose clothing is moving methodically, silhouetted against a nearly dark sky. An opening in the trees reveals the high, muddy bank of the *Lán Cāng Jiāng* or Mekong River, its powerful current sweeping by in the night. Another man is tied to a tree with hemp rope. He is wearing dark cycling shorts, a polyester T-shirt, a black bicycle helmet and a cloth gag. His eyes frantically follow his captor's every move.

The silhouette takes a step back from his prisoner, raises a semi-automatic pistol and shoots him twice. The sounds of the shots echo down the river as the body slumps against the ropes. There is a brief, eery silence as the night concert of birds and insects pauses, then resumes.

He studies the body and, satisfied, unties the rope so it slumps onto the ground. Drops of water drip onto the dead man's face.

The gunman turns towards the river and his own face catches some light from the sky. He looks about forty years old, hair cropped short with a colourful kerchief around his neck. From behind the tree, he picks up a worn, five-litre plastic water bottle, uncaps it and pours liquid over the body from head to toe. He steps back and, upon reflection, back a bit farther before taking out a little box, striking a wooden match and tossing it towards the body. It falls short and goes out. He removes two more matches, lights them together and throws them with more care, leaning as far towards the body as he dares. There is a momentary hesitation, then a whoosh as the body explodes in a pyramid of fire. He steps back quickly, heat on his face.

Orange and black flames shoot up into the wet, green foliage, crackling and hissing in their terrible contest. The burning plastic helmet jets a plume of bluish flame against the background of the forest, dark and dense, flames dancing against the shadows.

The man stands for a long time, staring into the fire. Then he walks past the burning body into the thick undergrowth, and re-emerges with a bicycle.

At the riverbank, he grabs it by the frame and front wheel and takes a clumsy practice swing. He frowns and adjusts his grip. His back swing is better on the second try and he successfully flings the bike out into the black water where it sinks as it sweeps away.

He throws the gun into the water, too, and the bottle, but leaves the rope on the bank beside a piece of chain. Then he stands immobile once again, watching the flames slowly shrink.



## Chapter One

Chief Dao had still not arrived, and Damian was starting to worry.

‘You’re not going down mountains as fast as before,’ his fellow cyclist kidded as he got to the bottom of the hill, completing the exhilarating finale to the day’s ride.

‘I’m still nervous,’ Damian admitted, removing his rain jacket and stuffing it back into a small bag on top of his bicycle frame. ‘I wear this now going down hills for a little extra skin protection, just in case.’ His Chinese was not bad, but far from perfect. His muscular, yet slender arm showed long scabs, still healing.

‘It really was a spectacular fall,’ said his friend, smiling in evil admiration as if the accident had been an accomplishment.

They continued to wait. At first, they had discussed how Chief Dao must have had a flat tire, but a half hour was too long to fix a flat. Neither of them mentioned that perhaps their friend had had an accident. That would be ‘crow’s mouth’ and bring bad luck.

In the morning, they had climbed nineteen kilometres uphill together, up the old, winding road to Small Meng Yang. They had lunched at a simple village restaurant on dishes of home-grown vegetables, meat and rice, seasoned with garlic and chilies. Afterward, they had come back through the mountainous park. The forest was thick and there were no villages at all for thirty kilometres. When a rare vehicle finally came along, it was only a motorcycle or one of the three-wheeled mini-trucks farmers used.

The two cyclists stood with their bicycles at the bottom of the hill, discussing how tired Chief Dao must be. They had stopped earlier

at a beautiful waterfall on a rocky, unpaved stretch and had fought for kilometres to stay on the road, clenching the handlebars, struggling not to slip and fall on the wet rocks and sand. Today's ride had been one hundred and three kilometres, almost half uphill. So yes, Chief Dao would be tired.

Damian was in better shape. Recently, he had returned from a 4,200-kilometre trip to Hainan, deliberately choosing hilly mountain roads with little traffic and sleeping out in a tent when there was no inn, at least not one which would let him stay without a fresh Covid test. Chief Dao was no slouch, either, a lifelong athlete just two or three kilos over his optimum weight, but a couple of decades overworked.

'Where'd you last see him?' asked the other cyclist in local dialect, which Damian could barely catch.

'About five kilometres after we started down,' he answered, undoing his chin strap to scratch his sweaty head. 'So, about eight kilometres back – you know, the spot where we always stop to admire the view.' Most of his mistakes in Chinese were with the tones.

They agreed it was a striking vista. A whole new neighbourhood of shops, restaurants and boutique hotels had been built there, the opposite side of the river from town. Though new, the buildings were constructed with traditional Dai-style solid wood beams. The Dai were the biggest ethnic group here. The streets beside the river were lined with tall trees, lit tastefully in yellowish light. Tourists loved it, flocking from the north in winter and donning shorts, summer dresses and dressing up in pseudo-Dai outfits.

Damian tried calling Dao Zai's phone again, but a recorded message said it was powered off. They were going to have to cycle back up to see what had happened. 'Something is wrong,' he whispered. 'Why didn't he call us?'

Deputy Chief of Police for Xishuangbanna Prefecture, Superintendent Ai, was a bear of a man, Deputy to Chief Dao. He had not shaved well and there were patches where his beard was already growing back in. He nodded as he listened to Damian's call in his swivel chair, holding the receiver to his ear with one hand and a cigarette in the other, eyes closed to picture the scene. 'Wait there,' was all he said before pressing down the receiver button and stubbing out his cigarette. He released the button on his desk phone and punched in a four-digit extension to order men up the mountain to help.

A feather rain was helping them stay cool. May was very hot, with highs of forty degrees or more by early afternoon, though evenings were mercifully cooler. Their heart beats were still elevated from the



day's exertions, so they cycled as slowly as they could, regretfully climbing back up to look for Dao Zai. They called his phone again but couldn't get through.

They discussed the possibilities, especially on less steep stretches where they had enough breath. They agreed a broken bicycle chain would take longer to fix, but neither was sure if he had the tool and spare links he needed. Also, cyclists don't break a chain going downhill.

Finally, they began to speak about the possibility of an accident. Maybe he had a blowout while going fast down the mountain, Damian suggested, or ... some sentences were still left unfinished.

'This is where I left him.' Damian pointed as he stopped at a small patch of dirt on the hillside, staying astride his bike with one foot on the ground. 'I waited here for him. He was only three or four minutes behind me. When he had almost caught up, he – how do you say it?' Damian chuckled his chin up to demonstrate the gesture.

They tried calling again and got the same recorded message. That was when Damian called Superintendent Ai to tell him Chief Dao had gone missing. He hoped they could still locate Dao's phone via the nearest cell tower.

After reaching the point where Damian last saw the Chief, they turned and began to ride slowly down the steep eight kilometres, riding the brakes and stopping at every bend to look for signs of an accident. A rider could easily turn a second too late on a sharp curve, especially in the dimming light, and slide off the edge of the hill.

Finally, a police car arrived with a rookie driver and an almost rookie partner, both excited, as it was about the Chief. Another police car brought more officers. Still more came, and by nine o'clock, there were forty-odd men and women searching various segments of the roadside with flashlights, even climbing down the slippery clay slopes, using ropes.

Damian and his fellow cyclist were each questioned separately in two different police cars. Damian, though, was questioned repeatedly. The repetition irritated him and he showed it, a Western trait. Once, after being asked the same question for a third time – where had he last seen the Supervisor? – he replied, 'Why not check your notes?'

Hearing this, the questioning officer looked at Damian with determination. 'Just answer.'

‘I saw him at the place where you parked the first car,’ Damian repeated with a sigh. ‘Because I took the first police officer who arrived to show her the spot.’

‘You are sure that is the spot?’ asked the officer.

‘I’m sure. We often stop there and look at the town while we wait for a buddy,’ answered Damian.

‘Okay, and what did he say the last time you saw him?’

‘As I said more than once, he did not say anything. Our habit is to sort of nod to the rider waiting for you, just to signal all is good, so he is free to take off again. You do not take a hand off the handlebars to wave when you are going fast downhill.’

‘How did he seem?’

‘Normal. He was having a great ride, smiling, hands covering his brake levers as he should.’

‘Anything unusual?’

‘No.’

The officer wrote for what seemed to Damian a long time. It didn’t help he was American and his Chinese was still shaky, nor the fact the officers had accents from all over China. Half of Jing Hong’s population had arrived in the last decade to take advantage of the booming economy. Once they asked if he thought the Chief was tired. Damian must have thought they asked if he thought he had ‘come,’ a similar sounding word, at least to his ears, and had answered, ‘Of course, he didn’t come! What the hell else are we all doing out here in the pouring rain looking for him?’ Neither Damian nor the policeman realized there had been a misunderstanding. This time the officer wrote down a single word, closed his notebook, and left.

The rain had turned heavy, and the officers were taking turns resting in the vehicles, leaving Damian alone. An older, wetter officer opened the door and heaved his considerable, dripping bulk into the back seat beside him. He gave him a good looking over first, without speaking, taking his hands to inspect them, front and back. Then he pulled the previous officer’s notebook out of a wet plastic bag together with his own, laid them on his lap, introduced himself and began to ask Damian the same questions.

Damian tried asking a question himself. ‘Did you locate where his phone last pinged a tower?’ The older man ignored him. Later, the other cyclist told him the last ping had been twenty km back, meaning Dao Zai’s battery had died long before they reached the last hill.

The cyclists both insisted on continuing to help with the search. The police found them extra raincoats and flashlights in a trunk, and

they were helpful, able to point out the most dangerous curves. But they found nothing, and by two a.m. they all packed it in, hoping the rain would stop by the morning. Their bicycles were put in the back of a police pickup truck, and they were each dropped off at their door, with their bike, to get some sleep.

## Chapter Two

You are from Xishuangbanna Prefecture, partly, right?’ asked Commissioner Wen with a thick Sichuan accent reminiscent of Deng Xiao Ping. Leaning forward to adjust his chair, he displayed the epaulets on the tops of his shoulders, each with an olive branch and a thick cross.

She ignored the word ‘partly.’ ‘I moved to Beijing when I was twelve, Commissioner Wen,’ Yu Ha answered, using the respectful tone suitable for addressing a superior officer. ‘But I went on spending a month or more every summer back in the capital, Jing Hong, until I finished school.’

He grunted and lowered his head again to his papers, examining a handwritten note. Yu Ha was wearing her crispest new uniform with her hair tied back and almost no makeup on her beautiful features. She sat very straight in front of her boss’s desk, or rather, his temporary desk. He was working from the Ministry of Security’s headquarters for the week. She studied him. His uniform could use some tailoring, as could the man himself. She imagined him at the gym, extra pounds bulging over Lycra shorts.

‘Good,’ he said, raising his head and continuing as if there had been no interruption. He had a curt way of speaking. ‘You must enjoy getting back there sometimes, though I suppose it has changed a lot.’ He rocked back in his chair as he said this, making his belly more prominent.

‘I go back every year, Commissioner Wen. And you are right; Jing Hong is the fastest-growing city in Yunnan Province. It’s exploding.’ She met his bold, appraising gaze for a moment, but it was

too intense and she dropped her eyes, uncomfortable, and wondering what exactly was ‘good.’

Perhaps he wanted her to go to Xishuangbanna for an investigation. A trip back home to ‘Banna’ was a pleasant enough prospect. Tourism and winter residences had swelled Jing Hong from the 20,000 inhabitants and unpaved streets of her childhood into a city of over 300,000. But Banna still had China’s largest tropical forests – green mountains everywhere with tea plantations and rubber trees covering their slopes. There were thousands of small mountain villages belonging to a dozen different ethnic groups. This year, a herd of wild elephants had made the national news for months by trundling six hundred km north to the provincial capital, followed on television every night by a fawning public.

The Commissioner lowered his head again, quickly scanned and signed three more documents before ringing for someone to come and take them away. Or course, he was a busy man, so perhaps there was no guile in making her wait. Finally, he capped his fountain pen, rocked his chair back even farther and folded his hands above his belt. ‘I am sending you to Xishuangbanna to look into the disappearance of the Police Chief there, Chief Dao Zai.’

For a second, she was challenged by his accent. ‘Disappearance?’ she asked, quickly recovering. She had met Chief Dao years before and had sometimes said hello to him at the station when she was home on a visit. He had a good reputation.

‘Apparently, he’s a big cyclist.’ Commissioner Wen snorted at that. ‘Some friends were waiting for him at the end of a day of cycling in the hills and he never arrived back. Poof!’

Yu Ha’s mind whirled. With the pandemic, she was going to have to quarantine for two weeks upon arrival and another two upon her return. Meanwhile, the Chief could turn up unharmed, leaving her in isolation for a month for nothing. She pictured herself desperately doing calisthenics in a cramped hotel room and almost groaned aloud. ‘How long since he went missing?’ She wore a pleasant, smiling face.

‘A day and a half.’ He spoke with a hint of impatience now. Yu Ha suspected the Commissioner resented her fast rise. She was only thirty-seven and a woman. That was part of it. But the real problem was her father was a white Canadian. It was what the Commissioner meant by ‘partly.’ A lot of people could not accept someone with half Western blood was a ‘real Chinese.’

She had heard Commissioner Wen had not wanted her to work in his Criminal Investigation Department, especially not the Crime Investigation Section, saying, ‘She can’t be trusted.’ He had called her a ‘banana Chinese,’ meaning “yellow on the outside but white on the inside.” It was unfair. Her mother had chosen Chinese nationality for Yu Ha shortly after her birth. She had spent her childhood with her parents in Xishuangbanna, but they divorced when she was twelve, and her father moved back to Canada. She only lived abroad once, in Vancouver, for two years. She owed her dad her near-flawless English and a fondness for some things Western, but she was Chinese.

Commissioner Wen began looking at his papers again.

She would soon be dismissed. ‘Who shall I work with there?’ she asked. Now, she could clearly sense his impatience.

‘You will be in quarantine so we have time to figure that out, don’t we?’ He waved his hand as if to banish such a trivial matter into thin air.

It was normal to send someone from Beijing to supervise an important or sensitive investigation, but it was not normal to send someone of the same rank as – in this case, the missing Chief Dao – Supervisor, Second Class. According to procedure, an investigation should be led by someone ranking higher than the suspect or victim, and accompanied on the mission by at least one other police officer. If it were not for the long quarantine, being sent to lead such an investigation would therefore be a vote of confidence. Instead, it might just be a fool’s errand.

Yu Ha was ambitious, carefully managing her career, or she never would have made it to headquarters in Beijing, much less the rank of Supervisor, Second Class already. In a career in investigation, every case mattered. She had to continue to walk on water for more years to come, putting each foot exactly on the next submerged steppingstone. One or two dud cases in a row might end her fast rise.

Commissioner Wen pushed a thin file across the desk and gave her a curiously gentle look that didn’t match his brusqueness. He had a fleck of cigarette ash on his sleeve, making him look vulnerable. Maybe she misjudged him. She really didn’t know what he thought of her today, after two years in his department. Her evaluations had been excellent, and he had signed them, but that didn’t always mean what it should. Heavy tropical rains would be starting soon in Xishuangbanna. She could almost hear the thundering sound and smell the steamy scents.

‘Read his file’ he said. ‘And be on the morning flight. Not a problem, is it?’

There was only one permissible answer. ‘No problem, Commissioner Wen.’ She got up to leave without further urging, automatically smoothing her pant suit over her slim hips and silently kicking herself for yielding to the unconscious habit. I have no gravitas, she thought, but he was already looking down at his papers again.

Crossing the large lobby on her way out, she looked down at the beautiful, patterned marble floor, thinking. She would have to leave her daughter and her mother alone together again.

After her father moved back to Canada, he had visited her every year at first, taking her back down to Banna. Later, he began to send her a plane ticket every summer instead, to visit him in Vancouver. She had still spent winter breaks in Banna. Later on, she spent two years in Vancouver on a police force exchange he helped arrange. It was a happy time, with time off spent exploring British Columbia’s mountains and beaches.

Years later, when her own marriage failed and she was left to raise their daughter, A Di alone, ‘Grandma’ had gladly moved in to help. Still, this time the two of them would be cooped up together by pandemic restrictions. No restaurants or movies and no morning Tai Chi for her mom. She would call her first, before A Di.

The Ministry of Security was the second building eastward from Tiananmen Square on Chang An Avenue or the ‘Street of Lasting Peace,’ diagonally across from the Forbidden City. The large, grey building housed relatively few staff, just eight hundred out of the four million policemen and women country-wide, all working in the Minister’s Cabinet Office or on other high-level affairs – none on active duty. Commissioner Wen was in meetings all week, chaired by the Deputy-Commissioner General, and so he had summoned Yu Ha here. The headquarters of the Criminal Investigation Department was in another building less than a kilometre away.

She sent a message to the driver and told him she had decided to walk. She needed some air and it was a beautiful day, with a blue sky and streaky, white clouds.

She never got over her success, among the few policewomen at headquarters’ level. She had earned it, solving a number of tough cases consecutively, but sometimes she feared she was just lucky. Most police officers, even senior ones, served a full career without ever setting foot in headquarters, much less having a meeting in the haloed Ministry building itself.

Two girls about A Di's age, fourteen, stopped in front of her on the street. They were riding rental bicycles and set about taking a double selfie together in front of Tiananmen Square, tilting their heads and flashing happy smiles. She didn't look forward to telling A Di she was going on mission again, but the warm sunlight filled her heart. It would not be bad to spend some time back home. She would just have to hope there would still be a case to investigate by the time she got out of quarantine.

Back in her office, Yu Ha sat with a cup of green tea and read the near-empty case file and two thin daily reports about the search. She smiled, realizing how authoring a report on your missing boss, when he might turn up any moment and read it himself, discouraged wordiness. They needed someone to take over the investigation before it stalled from an excess of tact.

Yu Ha took reading seriously, always trying to absorb everything thoroughly. If she could retain all the facts available, from the start, she had a better chance of spotting something significant. Any truly good detective, no matter how cavalier they might seem, burrowed into reports with the devotion of a monk studying scripture, but she was especially good at retaining large volumes of information.

There were terse reports on several short interviews with Supervisor Dao's wife, friends and colleagues. Nobody seemed to know anything about his disappearance. One paragraph noted how Chief Dao was 'disciplined,' standard speak for un-corrupted. He was even part of a club who picked up litter down by the river once a month, remarkable for a man of his generation. She wondered for a moment what kind of personal information must be in her own file.

The one subject covered by quite a few pages was Damian, an American cycling buddy of Supervisor Dao's who had been the last person to see him. He had been a few minutes ahead of Chief Dao going down a last, long hill, behind a third cyclist at the end of the day. All of them must be quite fit, she thought, remembering the steep, winding Old Road up to Small Meng Yang from when she was a little girl. Back then, it had been the only road out that way.

Yu Ha had no trouble seeing how Damian, being the last one with the Chief, would raise eyebrows. People's attitude toward Americans in China had hardened after Trump was elected. Damian had been interviewed for hours like a suspect. Of course, he was a potential suspect. But of what? She read on.

Damian reported he had last waited for the Chief at a spot where they sometimes stopped, about eight kilometres from the bottom



of the hill. Once the Chief came into sight, signalling all was good, Damian set off down the last stretch. The Chief braked the most going downhill, so he usually arrived last. Waiting periodically for the straggler to catch up was a cyclist routine.

Damian had been asked key questions repeatedly by different officers, and the answers compared. He had passed this standard test. While the content of his answers was more or less the same each time, there were little differences the brain throws in, different wording or details, signalling authenticity. The other cyclist, a policeman, also passed the test. Nor did it appear they had agreed in advance on a common story.

Yu Ha put down the file, dissatisfied but amused since so much of it was about the *lǎo wài* – the foreigner. Despite Damian's innocent appearance, there was an exceptionally detailed record of his account, especially compared to the scant coverage in general. One of Damian's responses had been annotated 'evasive.' More likely 'pissed off' she thought, imagining the scene.

There was also an especially long and thorough background check on Damian. He had come to Jing Hong twenty-nine years ago, aged thirty-one, after learning Chinese in Taiwan for six months. He had quickly fallen in love with the beautiful town, and with one of its more beautiful inhabitants, a dynamic, young woman named Yuan Yuan. They had married and opened a Western style cafe/restaurant on a shoestring, 'Café Banna.' It had been an instant hit, the only place where Western backpackers could get a taste of home. They eventually sold the business for a small stake and used it to move to the States and make a new start.

Any woman Yu Ha's age in Jing Hong knew the Café Banna, which was still going strong. As a teenager, she had sometimes gone there on a Saturday night with her girlfriends. They would sit out on the patio under the huge trees, drinking the least expensive thing on the menu, trying not to get caught looking at the young, foreign men. One of her friends had married a Spaniard and went off to live in Barcelona.

Half a lifetime later, Damian and Yuan Yuan had retired early from their American careers and returned to Jing Hong to open another cafe/pub, beside the river, with its own micro-brewery. At the age of sixty, Damian could still easily cycle one hundred km up a mountain and back, which he managed to do twice a week, plus other, shorter rides whenever he could get out.

She turned to the computer to access Supervisor Dao's file using the QR code and password provided. His picture came up in a blink. It was a lean Dai face, a bit like her own, though she was of course a mix. Yu Ha's mother was Dai. It was obvious Chief Dao was Dai from his surname. 'Dao' indicated a person descended long ago from the royal family, a now-extinct social class, but not entirely forgotten.

Being Dai was obligatory for the Chief of Police in Xishuangbanna, which was the 'Xishuangbanna Dai Minority Self-Ruling Autonomous Prefecture.' Like elsewhere in China, the self-rule part was not serious, yet the Dai were deeply rooted after eight hundred years and somehow, they did still manage to run the place.

The file was detailed. Dao Zai's father before him had also been a senior party member. He had worked at the Chinese Academy of Sciences Tropical Research Station where he had made a notable contribution to the development of pest-resistant bananas.

Chief Dao had attended Kunming University and Police College. Kunming was the provincial capital with a population of over eight million. He had returned to Xishuangbanna as a Constable, Second Class. At one point, he spent five more years back in Kunming, was posted back to Jing Hong as Deputy Chief, and then took over as Chief four years later. In three more, he would retire. In short, Chief Dao was a stable guy, steady as they came, who had now disappeared into thin air.

She took out her phone and hailed a car to take her home to pack. She could make calls easily from the back seat, she rationalized. In any case, the subway would be slower today because of line-ups for temperature checks, scanning Covid phone apps, and only half-filling the cars.

In the car, she got a call from a friend, another woman who worked in her department, who tipped her off it was the Deputy-Commissioner General himself who wanted Yu Ha on the case. He thought it made sense because Yu Ha knew the area and spoke both Dai and English, the latter because of the foreigner.

Maybe, she thought as she hung up, the mission was not going to be a waste of time after all, not if the Deputy-Commissioner General was following it personally.

## Chapter Three

Sai relaxed in his hot tub with a glass of red wine. Beside him was a young Lao woman, sensuously scooping up warm water with her hands and streaming it over his front and back.

When his telephone rang, he pushed the girl away, dried his hands with a towel and answered. '*Ma-y sung kha!*'

An excited voice spoke for a while in Shan while Sai listened. After he hung up, he called a number he had on speed dial. It answered immediately and he began to speak, again in Shan. 'We've been hit again! They destroyed Kutkai! We had a half....' Sai slapped the surface of the water in exasperation and water flew in every direction. He stopped in mid-sentence, looked doubtfully at the girl before waving her away with the back of his hand. She climbed slowly out of the tub with a smile, checking to see if his eyes were still on her. Wrapping herself in a towel, she walked haltingly towards the door, looking back until he impatiently shooed her away.

He continued. 'We had a half ton of refined product there as well as thirty million caps of yaba and some crystal. I have a new buyer for it, too, in a new market. The police have forgotten their place! I want you to hit them. Tonight! Not the main station. It is like an army base down there now. But you have been following some of those special corps' assholes, right? So, you know where some of them live?'

He listened to the answer, his expression becoming pleased. 'Good. Good. That's perfect. Send a team to their homes. It doesn't matter if you think they were involved in the most recent raid. Any of them will do. Take out everyone you find, and their neighbours, and their dogs. Burn down a couple of other houses nearby too. Make the whole fucking town afraid to live near them. I want them to get the

message – you don't take my money and screw me. I always repay betrayal!'

Sai's face contorted in anger as he listened for a moment. 'Take the best team,' he continued. 'And try not to get any of them killed again, okay? It's bad for morale. You know what? Send two teams. That way, each team can do just one place and then beat it. And use the heavy stuff so they don't have to get in too close.'

He listened again for a moment, nodding. 'Call me just before it starts and again when it's done.'

Sai's face instantly changed back to a placid normal. He called another number on speed dial and spoke quietly. 'Please bring me a phone.'

Almost immediately, an elderly man appeared with an old-fashioned-looking clamshell mobile phone on a silver tray, sealed in plastic. He offered it to Sai with a silent bow and backed away. Sai took it wordlessly, removed the plastic, turned it on, and waited for it to slowly boot. He dialled a long number.

'We have a little problem,' he said in polished English as he sat on the tub, now splashing playfully with his feet. 'I lost the shipment I had ready for you, so I need some extra time.'

He listened. Had another person been in the room, they would've been able to hear someone speaking on the other end, but not make out many words. The voice was calm.

'It just happened,' Sai said, apologetically. 'You need dependability, and I am the most dependable. But I am not running a grocery store. Sometimes, we run into problems. I can replace the shipment in two weeks.'

He solemnly listened. 'I appreciate you must maintain supply, but you should understand, Australia's population is not that big, not to us. We will have no trouble keeping you stocked. Maybe I can even ship in a week, but I can't promise that. For your second question, I will tell you. We have a little unexpected police problem. They've been generously taken care of but they're still confused. Now we are taking care of them in a different way. The shipment will go out and I will give you an extra 5% discount for the delay.' Sai added something in Chinese at the end.

The other voice spoke a few more words.

Sai smiled as he hung up. He took out the SIM card and snapped it in half. It bent but didn't completely break in two. He left it on the floor and threw the old-fashioned Nokia into the tub. He took a sip of his wine and called for the Lao beauty to re-join him.

At the Banna Gaza International Airport, Yu Ha and the other passengers walked into the small, new air terminal with its layered golden roof. The architecture symbolized traditional Dai wooden houses with their large gaps between overlapping layers of roof, providing ample ventilation yet keeping out the rains. It was June now, with a daily downpour in the morning or late afternoon.

There were only two dozen passengers around when she exited the luggage area. The officer picked her out immediately, meeting her eyes and nodding. He probably had her photograph on his phone. He wore year-old jeans and a T-shirt with 'NY' on it. She herself was wearing new, whitish jeans, brown leather trainers, and a blue blouse of blended silk and cotton. Neither looked like a police officer.

'I am to take you directly to quarantine at the City's Hotel in Jing Hong,' he said after introductions.

'No,' she corrected him, switching her wheeled suitcase to her left hand and taking out her phone with her right. 'It's full, so take me to Heping Xiaowu on the hill. Do you know the place? I am going to do my quarantine there.'

'Oh,' said the young Constable, slightly disconcerted. 'I know where it is – up past the water treatment plant. It's a nicer place, that's for sure.' He led her outside to the car.

The direct flight from Beijing's brand-new Big Star Airport had taken only three and half hours, but she had stayed up late getting ready and had gotten up at five a.m. to catch her flight. She had slept a while on the plane and dreamed about her Dai grandparents, both of whom were now gone. Now, she had a bright 'second morning' glow at one p.m.

In the car, she telephoned the acting Chief. 'Deputy Chief Ai, I am Yu Ha. I just got in.' She was being courteous, omitting her own rank of Supervisor, a full level above Superintendent.

'Welcome! Come straight over!' He sounded genuine.

'I have to go into isolation for five days, remember?' Quarantine rules, she had been relieved to learn, had been modified for officials on urgent business. She would only have to isolate for five days, not two weeks.

There was silence as he took it in. 'I don't see how you'll be much help from a room in the City Hotel.' He sounded angry.

Yu Ha didn't mind the tone so much, but bristled inwardly at the word "help." 'Actually, it is full up there. So, I am staying at Heping

Xiaowu, the place on the hill. I can start *leading* the investigation from there,' she said, loosening her shoes. The flight had swollen her feet.

There was an even longer silence. 'I know the place. Police don't stay there.'

He said it in a matter-of-fact way but it came out as if he was miffed. She herself had been a little surprised when the minions had agreed to let her stay in one of the cottages. The lodge was at the luxury end of the market, even with a generous discount. Covid had changed a lot of things. Also, she thought, it makes it harder for Deputy Chief Ai to keep tabs on her. 'Is there any progress with the search?'

'Not a thing.' He sounded normal again. 'Finding nothing is a finding of sorts though, I guess. We're sweepin' the mountain.' His Dai accent was thick but not a problem for Yu Ha since she had grown up speaking with one herself. She still had a trace of it. 'Do you have any other ideas, Deputy Chief?' She had her note pad out.

'Whole thing beats me.' There was the sound of a metal lighter, and she could hear him inhaling.

Yu Ha chose her next words carefully, still holding her notebook. 'Deputy Chief, do you know if Chief Dao had any enemies, people who might want to hurt him?'

'You're joking, right?'

He had a point, she supposed. A police chief always had enemies, bitter criminals, of course, but also bitter colleagues.

'What I mean is, can you think of a recent conflict or something that might have gone too far?'

'I don't know about nothin' like that. It's been extra-busy, though. I mean, since the pandemic started.'

'Busy?' she asked.

'Well, you know, drugs and more drugs. The border.'

'How many murders in Banna this year?'

'Eleven, but everythin's crazy.'

'Crazy?'

'Well...' He paused before continuing. 'They're puttin' up this fence along the whole border 'cause of Covid, so all the old smuggling routes have changed, and the smugglers, too. Now everybody's freelancing.'

'Freelancing,' she repeated, knowing that usually made people elaborate.

'The Burmese put the cross-border action up to a kind of auction. Last week, we caught some guy and his girl with twenty-seven kilograms on his motorbike, right downtown. He had an accident and

smear white powder clear across the road!’ The Deputy-Chief stopped to chuckle. ‘The Border Police got a lot more resources now, too. They filled up their new barracks.’

‘And the murders?’

‘About the same.’

‘So, who gets killed?’

‘Competitors, I guess, from different smuggling gangs, or people out of favour. There are Shan gangs, lots of Karin, too, and now the Lao boys are getting in on the action – mostly yaba and crystal.’

She was jarred by the dark side of her childhood home. ‘How are the Border Police keeping up with all this?’

‘Okay, I guess. They caught one bunch using a catapult to fire packets of heroin sewn into leather bags more than half a kilometre inside the fence,’ he said with a guffaw. ‘Can you imagine? Medieval! They heard a whumping sound in the night. You wouldn’t want to get hit by one of them parcels.’ The Deputy Chief laughed again at his own words.

‘Do you think Chief Dao’s disappearance had to do with the drugs?’ asked Yu Ha.

‘Pretty well everything serious here has something to do with drugs. But the Chief’s uh, disappearance, I just can’t figure it.’

Yu Ha noted the ‘uh.’ The Deputy figured the Chief was probably dead. She wrote ‘uh’ in her notebook, enough to remind her later of the thought. She asked if there was someone who could work with her, as was protocol, and he said he would find her someone. She unpacked her things and sat on the porch for a while with a notepad, making a list of people to contact. A downpour started, the loud clatter filling the air.

The phone rang. It was a nurse from the Xishuangbanna Prefecture Hospital who had arrived at the main gate to give her the first of three Covid tests. She walked up to the gate to meet her, using the cottage’s umbrella. After the nurse swabbed the roof of her mouth, she walked slowly back, enjoying the rain.

The first telephone call she made was to the Senior Secretary to the Chief. A Secretary usually knew a lot about her boss’s movements, contacts, etc. and could be a valuable source. She wanted to interview her properly, if still by telephone, and they agreed on a time the following day. For now, she just wanted the basics. ‘Do you have any ideas about what happened to the Chief?’

‘No.’

‘Nothing?’

‘No ... no,’ she said slowly, as if searching her memory.

‘Anything unusual happen lately?’ Yu Ha persisted.

‘Not really, no.’

‘Can you think of anyone who might want to hurt the Chief, or something like that?’

‘He’s the Chief of Police. What do you think?’

‘But nobody comes to mind?’

‘No,’ replied the Secretary.

Yu Ha jotted down the single word ‘interesting’ in a notebook, her private code for ‘something seems off.’

Next, she called an old friend, Zhang Shifa, whom she knew since high school. He had been a handsome, intelligent boy, and at one time she’d had a crush on him, though such things were suppressed back then.

‘Hello?’ Shifa answered with a doubtful voice. Most calls from strange numbers were from marketing people or scammers.

‘Shifa, it’s me, Yu Ha!’ she said laughing. ‘They have sent me down to look into the Chief’s disappearance. I just got in.’

‘Yu Ha! Wow, it’s really been a long time. I knew you were coming. Everybody knew. People remember I know you, too, so they’re all asking me what you’re like. You are causing quite a stir.’ Shifa was as talkative as ever. ‘Firstly, the Chief goes ‘poof’ and now they send a, well, unusual, young woman – a Beijing star – to lead the investigation. The station is abuzz with gossip.’

‘What did you tell them?’

‘About you? I said you were smart, for one thing, and that both halves of your heart were Chinese.’

‘Thanks. Listen, can I invite you to dinner together, well, sort of together? I am in quarantine, but I am thinking you can eat on my porch with me inside the cottage. We can talk through the window. Technically, that is not breaking quarantine, or at least close to not. I need someone to kind of bring me up to date.’

‘Cottage?’ asked Shifa.

‘Lucky me, the City Hotel is full, so I have permission to stay at Heping Xiaowu – you know the place?’

‘Oh wow! That place! Yeah, I know it. Cushy. It won’t even really feel like quarantine there. You can walk in the garden. Okay. Sure. I’ll be there after six. Its great you’re here!’

Dating in high school had been forbidden, so nothing ever came of their friendship. Years later, when Shifa also joined the police



force, he had sent her an email, ostensibly asking for advice but also for support. She had written back, and they had stayed in touch. However, Shifa's career had not progressed as she would have expected. Admittedly, he had gone to Police College a little late, but afterward, he had advanced slowly, eventually making Superintendent, Third Class.

She sat for a while, thinking what to do next and deciding on nothing. She was in quarantine, after all. She would practice some Wing Chun.

Later, dinner turned out to be a bad idea. It felt uncomfortable, especially having not seen Shifa for so long. He could see her through the window but she could not see him very well because the porch light bulb burned out with a pop as soon as they turned it on. She passed him a candle and a glass of *bái jiǔ* – strong liquor made from sorghum, fermented with yeast and fungi that gave it a complex flavour and a high alcohol content.

The best part was the food. She had ordered classic Dai dishes brought from the kitchen. The cook herself was Dai, from a village in the mountains, and talented. The plates of vegetables and meat, with their hot sauces and different seasonings, were close to the dishes of her childhood. There was a dish of minced pork mixed with small, parsley-like leaves, along with the crushed garlic and hot chilis she loved. She gobbled it up together with leaves of fresh lettuce.

It started to rain, a downpour again, and for a few minutes, they couldn't talk because of the noise. Once they had to re-light the candle, and Shifa began to get splashed but couldn't come in. When the rain abated, conversation was even more stilted. Shifa made the best of it and tried to chatter away, helping her catch up on people. But it was awkward. She couldn't blame him. She was his old friend-who-was-once-a-girl, and almost girlfriend, now become his much superior officer from Beijing, investigating the disappearance of his Police Chief.

Still, she learned a few worthwhile things. For one, senior figures in the Department had been investigated three times in the last two years for connections to the local mafia. The Chief himself had never been under suspicion, but Deputy Chief Ai had been investigated twice. There had been detentions and eventually formal arrests of a few mid-ranking officers.

After he left, she took another small glass of *bái jiǔ*. Alcohol, she realized, was becoming a weakness of hers. Sometimes, she couldn't switch off thinking about work and couldn't sleep without a

least one glass of the strong liquor. She sat outside on the porch for a while in the chair she would have sat in if she could have joined Shifa.

Finally, she got into bed, but before she slept, she called A Di, who excitedly asked her for money to take a weekend trip with friends. Maybe too excited? Only fourteen years old and away with teenage friends for a whole weekend? ‘Hmm. I’ll think about it,’ she had said, and they both knew what that meant.

She also talked to her mom, who told her the gas valve had stopped working. They had not been able to cook a regular dinner, but the gas company was sending someone in the morning. She made Yu Ha promise to call her uncle soon. Yu Ha enjoyed hearing about what was going on in her family’s lives. It helped her forget the frustration of being stuck in quarantine.