

## CHINATOWN, 1984

Colin took another slug of coffee and stared blankly across the small sterile room. He was sitting at a spare metal table with his backpack at his feet. His eyes began to focus on the cot along the far wall. *How long did I sleep?* He was trying to reconstruct the past twelve hours. Or was it twenty-four hours? *Who left this large cup of coffee on the table?*

Probably Pancho, who once said that there were “no accidents in this business.” That was almost fifteen years ago, when the “special program” was disbanded just months before he was due to graduate.

Colin’s thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the sheet metal door. Before he could respond, a middle age man with thinning gray hair and a salt and pepper mustache walked in. He was dressed in a navy blue suit and carrying an aluminum attaché case. He sat down across from Colin and laid the case on the table.

The folding chair squeaked beneath Colin’s linebacker sized body as he squirmed and faced the man who had just entered. “Are you here to interrogate me, Pancho?”

“Lord no. I want to avail myself of your talents.”

“How’d you find me?”

“We keep tabs on former assets.”

“Former asset? I was a high school kid in Iowa who was good at Asian languages when you put me in the program back in '66. Yeah, I got some training. And it was great to be at the University of Hawaii. But I never actually worked for the Agency.”

“That’s not how we look at it. Let’s not forget that we put you through college. It’s not on us that you choose not to finish.”

“And it’s not on me that the Vietnam War went south and you guys deep sixed the program.”

Pancho stared at Colin for a moment, his icy gaze cutting through him. “Are you done now?”

Colin gulped down some more coffee. “Where are we?”

“This is a private sub-basement facility in the Financial District of San Francisco. You do remember flying here yesterday?”

“Oh yeah. But I don’t remember anything after running into you and your two associates at the airport bar. Did you drug me?”

“Enough with the questions. I told you back in '70 that we might need your help down the road. Well, it’s down the road now.” Pancho sat up, pulled out a small spiral pad and pen

and slid them across the table to Colin. “Has the caffeine kicked in? I’d like to start the briefing.”

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They were slogging their way through evening rush hour traffic. The ten-block drive west from Embarcadero Center seemed to be taking an eternity. Colin fidgeted with his backpack as he peered out the window at the progressively smaller buildings that lined Sacramento Street as they approached Chinatown. “Remind me again, who are we visiting?”

“He calls himself Harry. I don’t know his Chinese name. He’s a major player in the export business out of Asia. On the street he’s known as Hong Kong Harry.”

“My Cantonese is a little rusty but that shouldn’t be a problem. They use a lot of English cognates in Hong Kong. If necessary we can go to pad and pencil. They write in traditional Chinese.”

Pancho instructed his driver to make the left on Brooklyn Place and pull into one of the six private parking spots on the sidewalk. “Wait here. We should be twenty minutes, half hour tops.”

Colin and Pancho walked back on Sacramento to Hang Ah Street, a block-long pedestrian-only thoroughfare. As they ventured up the alleyway, Colin looked up at the colorful clothing drying in the wind on the fire escapes that protruded from the tenement buildings.

A red rectangular wooden sign embossed with gold Chinese writing hung over the entrance

to one of the buildings. Pancho walked up to the front door and pushed it open. It looked like the lock had been broken for years. Colin followed him in and they started to climb the stairs.

“The key to this conversation is the pace. You should go as slowly as you need to. What I want to communicate to Harry is very precise.”

The steps creaked under their feet. The air smelled like a combination of cigarettes and mold. Despite the moderate early summer temperature, the dampness cut into Colin’s bones. They arrived at the fifth floor landing and faced two doors. Pancho went up to the one on the left and knocked. A small old Asian man dressed in a full length floral kimono answered.

“May I help you?” he said.

“I’m Pancho. And this is my interpreter Colin. We have an appointment with Harry.”

“Please to meet you, Pancho. I am Mr. Wong. Follow me.”

He led them down a dark narrow hallway to a modest sitting room. There were portraits of Chiang Kai-shek and The Buddha hanging on the plaster walls beneath a corrugated tin ceiling. Several candles burned on the perimeter. There was no electric light. Harry was in the back of the room, seated in a tall antique wooden armchair adorned with intricate carvings and a red cushion. He was dressed in black chinos and a black collarless silk shirt.

His clothing highlighted a scant goatee and long thinning gray hair that was tied behind his head in a ponytail. He stood as the three men entered.

Pancho stepped forward and went into a slight crouch. He was almost a foot taller than Harry and was showing respect. He extended his right hand. "Neih hou," he said, the customary Chinese greeting with the Hong Kong pronunciation.

Harry shook hands with Pancho and lowered his eyes. "Neih hou."

Pancho turned and tilted his head toward Colin. Colin stepped forward, crouched and greeted Harry. They had a brief exchange in Cantonese. Colin turned to Pancho and said, "This will go smoothly. We understand each other well."

Mr. Wong picked up two black Elmwood Zen stools and placed them in front of Harry's chair. He bowed and exited. Pancho and Colin sat down.

Pancho began the conversation. "Thank you for this meeting, Honorable Harry. I have a message from the people I work for, decision makers in the US intelligence community. Shall I proceed?"

"Please do."

"As I believe you know, the prolonged war with the Soviets in Afghanistan has begun to negatively effect the production of heroin in that region. To take advantage of that, we hear

there are plans for a succession of record poppy crops in the Golden Triangle over the next few years.”

Colin gulped and then proceeded with the translation. Pancho waited for him to catch up, then continued. “If this is even halfway successful, the streets of Hong Kong will be flooded with Burmese heroin by this time next year. To alleviate the glut, there will be pressure to expand distribution in the United States. Do you see the logic in this line of reasoning?”

“It is both logical and enlightening,” Harry replied.

“We urge you to resist this pressure. The current level of heroin imports is fine. We have no problem with it. However, expansion of the trade at this time would raise serious issues for us.”

“You are speaking as if I control the flow of this commodity into the United States. That’s too much to ask of one person, don’t you think?”

“Certainly. But we have reason to believe that you have major impact on that flow. Are we correct in that?”

“For the sake of this conversation, let us assume that you are. What do you propose I say to my people when they exert this pressure you speak of?”

“You could suggest that it would be more profitable to sell the excess product in

underexploited local markets. Like Japan, Korea, even China.

“Thank you for this information. These are very interesting and bold ideas. Many I haven’t heard before.”

“Thank you for listening to them.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Are you helping me make a business decision? Or has it already been made for me?”

“I come as a friend. The people I work for do not want war with you. This is what they need to ensure peaceful coexistence. Your enterprise is protected. We have reason to believe that you are doing quite well. Is that not the case?”

“I have no complaints.” Harry looked down for a moment. Then he looked straight at Pancho for the first time. “Your eagerness to have me limit my operation makes me wonder what you are up to. Are your people looking to bring a new commodity to the United States market?”

“That is an interesting question.” Now it was Pancho’s turn to pause. “Why do you ask?”

“I might be interested in this new commodity, depending of course on its nature and the terms of business.”

“Would you like me to look into that for you?”

“If you would be so kind.”

They stood, faced each other and half bowed.

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Pancho. Thank you for your generosity. This information is much appreciated. You have my assurance that I will keep things as they are for now, to the extent that I can of course.”

“Thank *you*. My people will be very pleased.”

Colin rose, looked at Harry in a soft gaze, nodded slightly and said “joi geen.” Harry returned the slight nod and smiled, acknowledging the formal good bye. Pancho sidled up next to Colin and nodded at Harry. Mr. Wong re-entered the room and escorted the Americans to the door.

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They walked down the staircase in silence.

Once they exited the building, Pancho said, “You did a great job in there. A service to your country.”

Colin shuffled down the alley, a step behind Pancho. He was mulling over the dialogue he had just facilitated. “Are we really protecting the smuggling of heroin into the United



States? Wouldn't we want to eliminate it?"

"That is not your concern. Nor mine. There are complex geopolitical realities at play here.

Let's leave it at that."

"And what did Harry mean by 'a new commodity?'"

"I don't know. You ask a lot of questions, Colin. That's not a good idea in this line of work.

It's time for you to forget what transpired up there."

Colin's heart rate rose as he searched for the right words. "You mean like they say in spy movies? This conversation never happened."

"Yes. Except this isn't a movie."

They returned to Brooklyn Place where the car stood, engine idling. Pancho slipped into the front passenger seat. Colin slid into the back.

"Where to, boss?" the driver said.

Pancho turned to Colin. "Would you like us to take you to your girlfriend in Potrero Hill? Or would you prefer your girlfriend in The Mission?"

Colin was startled speechless. Before he could answer, Pancho passed him a 6" x 9" manila

envelope. He opened the clasp. It contained a stack of twenties and a pager. "What's this for?"

"The cash is payment for the services you just rendered. We don't work with amateurs. The pager allows us to be in touch more directly. When it goes off, call the number immediately. You know the drill."

Colin nodded, slipped the cash into his backpack and stuffed the pager into his left pants pocket. Remembering his training, he handed the envelope back to Pancho.

"Good form," Pancho said.

"Thanks. And I don't need a ride. I can take it from here."

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Colin ambled west, trying to formulate a plan. *I need to find a temporary base of operations in the Bay Area.* He made his way to California Street and hopped onto a cable car back to the Financial Center. He continued on foot, walking randomly among the skyscrapers, pausing frequently to look around.

Once he felt secure that he wasn't being followed, he got on the BART at Embarcadero Station and took it east into Oakland. He got off at the Lake Merritt station and wandered the streets for a few minutes, snaking his way toward the water under the twilight sun. Soon after passing through Jack London Square, he came upon a large nondescript hotel. *This will do nicely.*

He checked in. He called his girlfriends from the room phone, telling them he'd come down with the flu and had to cancel his visit, feigning illness with his voice. He withdrew the pager from his pocket and placed it on the night table. *Now it's just you and me, kid.* He took the cash out of his backpack and counted it, \$1,000 for an afternoon's work. *Not bad. That should last me a while.*

He started to unpack, taking his toiletries to the bathroom. He felt weary and decided to freshen up. He brushed his teeth and took a shower. Still tired, he went to bed. He was asleep within minutes.

He awoke to the sound of the pager. He picked it up, silenced it, and dialed the number on the display. A voice instructed him, "In five minutes, go downstairs to the bar. There are three phone booths in the back. Sit in the middle one and wait."

His heart rate kicked up a couple of notches. *How do they know where I am?* He hurriedly dressed and packed, making sure to leave nothing in the room. Five minutes later he was in the booth staring at an old rotary pay phone. The number in the middle of the dial looked familiar. He checked the pager. Same number. *Holy shit, they were just here.*

He opened the door to the booth and surveyed the scene. Other than the bartender, there was no one in the room. The phone rang. The voice said, "There's a package under the seat. Bring it to Hong Kong Harry's place immediately." He reached below and felt the handles of a small canvass bag. He lifted it up. It weighed about three pounds. Inside the bag was a

square cardboard box. *Tell me this isn't a kilo of heroin.*

He stuffed the bag into his backpack, exited the phone booth and made a beeline for the BART. He returned to Embarcadero Station, walked to California Street and hopped on a cable car. As he rode toward Chinatown he looked around at the other passengers. *Am I still being followed?*

He hopped off the cable car one stop early. No one got off with him. He walked the two blocks to Hong Kong Harry's building at a snail's pace, trying to calm himself down. He climbed the stairs, his anxiety rising with each step. Mr. Wong greeted him at the door. "Colin, yes? It's good to see you," he said. "Come this way."

The room in the back lacked the exotic ambience of his prior visit. The walls were bare. Standing incandescent lamps had replaced the candles. The grand antique chair and the fancy stools were missing. Hong Kong Harry was seated on a metal folding chair wearing blue jeans, a tan shirt and a black cotton vest.

"You made it here quite quickly. Excellent," Harry said, in a subdued British accent.

"You speak English?"

"Indeed. But that doesn't mean I don't have use for an interpreter. Particularly one who looks so American."

“Is Pancho in on this?”

“Don’t worry about Pancho. You work for me now. Did you bring the package?”

Colin handed the canvass bag over. “Is this heroin?”

Harry smiled and shook his head. “Pancho told me about this.”

“About what?”

“That you ask a lot of questions. It’s not an endearing trait.”

Harry took the box out of the canvass bag. He withdrew a penknife from his vest pocket and cut off the top, revealing two small free weights and wads of crumpled up newspaper.

“I’m glad you did not do this inspection yourself. In fact, you’ve passed this entire test with flying colors. I’m quite pleased.” He handed Colin a 6” x 9” manila envelope.

Colin opened it. A stack of bills about the size of the one he had received the previous day, except fifties instead of twenties. And a pager.

“You can lose the pager Pancho gave you. I’m not sure when I’m going to need you, but it may be on short notice. I suggest you find a flat in town. This cash should get you started. If you want to keep your place in Honolulu, that’s up to you. Have I answered all your

questions?”

“You have. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I know this goes without saying, but no word...”

“Got it,” Colin cut in.

“Good form,” said Harry. “Mr. Wong will show you out.”

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The multi-racial crew huddled next to the twelve-foot truck that was parked outside a warehouse on Pier 96. They were making small talk and smoking cigarettes as they waited for the boat to arrive. It was only 2:00 am, yet a dank mist was already forming over the Bay. Colin pulled his windbreaker tight and rubbed his arms.

All six of the other crewmembers looked to be about his age, except for the leader, a burly bald man who sported a salt and pepper beard. He and Colin were the only white men. The others were Latino (probably Mexican) or Black, with one who sounded Caribbean (maybe Haitian). *We are sitting ducks here. God, I hope we can get this job done before any security shows up.*

Colin did not know the names of any of the other men. Hong Kong Harry had made it clear that offloading work was done anonymously. The crew’s job was to carry approximately fifty medium-size packing boxes off the boat, load them onto the truck and deliver them to

a location in nearby Bayview.

The boat was to be piloted by Harry's regular Chinese crew. Harry suspected that the crew had been stealing from him. Colin's job was to surreptitiously listen in on their conversation, find out what he could about their rogue operation, and report all relevant information to Harry the following afternoon.

Colin looked at his watch. Only a minute had elapsed since he'd last checked the time. Things were moving too slowly. And too quickly. As he half listened to the crew's chatter, Colin mentally recounted his past three days. He'd flown in from Honolulu on Tuesday to hang out with his friends and party during the Democratic National Convention, which was scheduled to start the following Monday. He was snatched up by Pancho upon his arrival. By Wednesday evening, Pancho was out of the picture. Now he was on an isolated pier, doing surveillance for Hong Kong Harry while offloading narcotics from a boat. And it was only late Thursday night. Actually Friday morning. *July 13<sup>th</sup>! Fuck. This boat better get here soon.*

All of a sudden he heard the crew leader yell, "Follow me" and start to jog towards the water. "Get ready to rock and roll." He could see a cabin cruiser pulling into the cove between Pier 96 and Heron's Head Park.

They arrived at the water's edge just as two Chinese men were securing the boat to the dock and lowering the gangway. A third Chinese man was at the helm. He said something in Mandarin to his two mates, walked down the gangway and spoke to the crew leader in

broken English.

“Boxes in cabin, go below.”

The leader ordered the crew to form a chain. Colin was given the position on the gangway, within earshot of the Chinese. During the six minutes it took them to offload the cargo, Colin was able to ascertain that the Chinese had hidden two boxes, both containing heroin, in a storage compartment in the cabin. They were going to take those boxes to the western shore of Hunter’s Point once the offloading crew was gone.

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Colin arrived back at his Oakland hotel room at 3:30 am. He had tried to decompress on his journey home. He undressed and went to bed, but couldn’t keep his eyes closed for more than a few seconds. He eventually dozed off, waking at about 10:00 am still wired. He turned on the TV and watched a soap opera, but was distracted and turned it off.

He considered going out for some breakfast, but he wasn’t hungry. He picked up the spiral pad that Pancho had given him and wrote down every detail he could remember about the past four days. He tried to make connections between people, between places, between events. After a half hour, he gave up. He didn’t have enough information to make sense of what was going on. He tore up the pages and flushed them down the toilet.

Finally the clock read 12:45 and he could head into the City for his 2:00 pm meeting with Hong Kong Harry. He took the BART into San Francisco, and again rode the California Street cable car from the Financial District to Chinatown. He grabbed his backpack and exited the



car, this time one stop late. He shielded his eyes from the bright overhead sun as he walked toward Harry's alongside a throng of tourists. Many were probably convention delegates or out of town press.

As he was passing Brooklyn Place, he glanced over at the parking spaces. *Holy shit, that's Pancho's car.* The driver was alone in the vehicle, engaged in an animated conversation on the car phone.

He turned onto Hang Ah Street. There was a crowd gathered outside Harry's building. As he got closer, he spied a good number of San Francisco police officers and a group of men wearing FBI jackets. Mr. Wong stood next to a patrol car, restrained by handcuffs behind his back. Colin made sure to avoid his gaze.

He picked out the youngest looking local cop, who was positioned in front of the crime scene tape that cordoned off the building. He pulled out the spiral pad and approached the policeman.

"I'm a reporter for the Iowa City Press-Citizen. What happened here?"

"A shootout on the fifth floor. Two dead," the officer replied.

Colin pointed to Mr. Wong. "Who's the old man in cuffs? Is *he* the prime suspect?"

"He's a person of interest. He was apprehended while leaving the building."

“Why is the FBI involved?”

“One of the victims was a federal officer.”

“And the other?”

“A Chinese businessman. This is all I can tell you at this time.”

“Thank you for the information. You’ve been most helpful.”

“You’re welcome. And hey, can I see your press credentials?”

Colin rifled through the pockets of his windbreaker. “Shit, I must have left them in the car. Should I go get them?”

“Ah, don’t worry about it.”

Colin pushed through the crowd and walked slowly back down the alley. When he made it to Sacramento Street, he retraced his steps. At Brooklyn Place, he noticed that Pancho’s car was no longer there. He threw the spiral pad into a garbage can and picked up his pace. At Powell Street, he hopped on a cable car north toward Fisherman’s Wharf. When he arrived there, he purchased a ticket to Sausalito at the Pier 41 ferry terminal.

The boat was scheduled to leave in fifteen minutes. He went to the Men's Room and found an empty stall. He closed the latch, withdrew Hong Kong Harry's pager from his pants pocket and sat down on the toilet. He took Pancho's pager from the side pocket of his backpack, turned both pagers off and placed them inside the backpack. He removed the manila envelope containing the \$3,500 he'd been paid and put it in the inside zipper pocket of his windbreaker.

He boarded the ferry and made his way to the starboard side of the upper deck. The Bay glistened in the bright afternoon sun. A gusty wind blew through his hair. Ten minutes later, as the boat was passing by Alcatraz Island, Colin threw the backpack overboard into the choppy water below.