

Fifty

Chapter 1

"O divine art of subtlety and secrecy! Through you we learn to be invisible, through you inaudible; and hence, we can hold the enemy's fate in our hands."

Sun Tzu (~520 BC)

Yan Longwei sat in his darkened living room, and played the VHS tape over and over. Each time, the grainy black and white film showed an aerial view of the Japanese city. Each time, a bright flash was followed by a billowing cloud reaching for the heavens like an angry, glowing fist. His wife and daughter slept in their rooms, unaware that he was haunted by this scene of tens of thousands of deaths.

"Millions would die; not thousands, but I have no choice. I have a duty to my country," he told himself, as he ran the tape back, and played it once more.

As the Hiroshima weapon detonated, he glanced at his watch. It was 1 AM and time to leave.

San Francisco, California, USA

Pier 19

July 10, 1992, 0120 hours PST

"It never rains this time of year. Why tonight?" Longwei said, as he drove his truck behind Warehouse 4.

Sleep had eluded him for two days. The fact that the summons had come, after all these years, had left him stunned and afraid.

"I am Chinese. I have an assignment. I must do my duty to the Motherland," Longwei said aloud, as the warehouse door lifted, and he backed his truck into the dry loading bay.

As the door lowered shut, he placed the truck into park and set the brake. His hands were shaking so hard that he almost dropped the ancient bronze coin as he pulled it from his shirt pocket. He had possessed this coin for 12 years. It had become an afterthought, until two days ago.

He heard a tapping noise, glanced to his left, and saw the muzzle of an AK-47 pressed against the glass. He smiled, and bowed several times, as he cranked down the window.

"The sun always rises on the Chinese empire," Longwei said, as he presented the coin to the man holding the AK-47.

The man took the coin, and handed it to another man standing behind him.

The tall man stepped into Longwei's view while he studied the coin and asked, "And where is the Chinese Empire?"

"Everywhere," Longwei answered.

"Stay in the truck. I'll let you know when the loading is complete," the other man ordered.

Longwei nodded and bowed several more times.

"We trust this shipment to him? He looks like he's ready to piss himself," Cheng Li said, as the two men walked away.

"He will be escorted. Just follow the plan. Give him the coin back. It is his to keep until the package has been installed. To do otherwise would be bad luck. When all is complete you are to retrieve the coin. It must be sent back to its owner," Lung Shen said, as he handed the coin to Cheng Li.

Longwei kept his head down, staring at his shaking hands.

"Just get through tonight. Everything will get back to normal after this. This is just a precaution to protect our country. I must do my duty," Longwei told himself, as he felt the truck sag as a great weight was added to the back.

"They will help me unload the package, make sure it is stored properly and then leave. Nothing will ever happen . . . nothing, and I will have fulfilled my duty to my homeland," Longwei thought, as he heard the rear door slam shut.

He jumped when Cheng Li appeared at his window.

"Follow the plan Yan Longwei. That is all you have to do. Drive back to your restaurant. My men are in the back. They will secure the package and build the wall. Then they will disappear, and you will go back to cooking and raising your family," Cheng Li said, as he handed the coin back to Longwei.

Longwei bowed several more times as he took the coin, and went to return it to his shirt pocket. He missed, and the coin bounced off his thigh, and landed at his feet. As he reached for it, his seat belt jerked him upright. He jumped as the warehouse door rose letting in the sound and the smell of the rain.

"On your way now and drive carefully. It's still raining," Cheng Li cautioned, as he banged on the driver's door of the truck.

Longwei bowed, cranked up the window, and started the truck. As he put it into gear, it lurched forward and stalled. He glanced at the man with the AK-47

who was shaking his head. Longwei took a deep breath as he restarted the truck. Then he shifted the truck into first, and let up on the clutch. He shifted into second as the truck cleared the warehouse entrance, and turned on his headlights and wipers.

"That is the best China has; a restaurant owner?" Cheng Li asked, as the truck disappeared into the heavy rain.

"That's the beauty of it, my friend. Who would ever suspect a little xiaoqiang like that of hiding a nuclear weapon in the shed behind his restaurant," Lung Shen said, as the warehouse door slammed shut.

Longwei drove through the abandoned streets near the port. His restaurant was only three miles away, but the trip seemed to take an eternity.

"Why is every light red? It's the middle of the night, every light should be green," Longwei said, as he left Pier 19, and turned left on Embarcadero.

He stalled the truck again, and began cursing in Chinese as he restarted the truck. His heart was beating so hard that he could feel the pounding in his chest.

"Great, I'll drop dead of a heart attack. The police will find a dead Chinese in a truck loaded with a nuclear bomb. The US and China will be at war within a week," Longwei thought, and began hum an old Chinese tune to calm himself.

"Left on Washington, left on Drumm, right on California, and head for the restaurant," Longwei said, as the wipers tried to keep the downpour off the windshield.

"Four red lights in a row! Deep breath, Longwei, deep breath, almost home," he told himself, as he turned left on 9th Avenue.

The driveway that led to his brick storage building was narrow. The only illumination was from a street light twenty yards down the street.

"I've backed down this alley a thousand times. I can do this in my sleep," Longwei said, as he passed the driveway, and swung the rear end into the narrow opening between buildings.

"That's it, careful. If I hit Mrs. Kau's house she'll wake up, and be in the road with an umbrella cursing at me," Longwei said, as he lined up the truck and checked both mirrors.

"I can't see a thing," he muttered, as he glanced out both side windows.

"Relax, it's centered," he said, as he began backing down the alley.

"Fifty feet, stop, get out and check, then open the doors and back in five feet. You've rehearsed this. Just do it," Longwei told himself, as he squeezed the large panel truck between the buildings.

"That should do it," he said, as he leapt from the truck.

He didn't notice the small bronze coin fall from the truck, bounce once, and settle against the brick wall of the back of his restaurant. Removing the padlock from the doors, he swung them both open, climbed back into the truck, and backed it five feet into the building.

He raised the rear gate on the truck, and found a pistol staring him in the face.

"We are here. Everything is ready," Longwei said, as he bowed several times.

"Forklift?" the fat man asked.

"Back there, under the tarp. The key is in the ignition," Longwei answered, as he backed away.

The man gestured to two other men, and they headed for the forklift.

"This will do," the fat man said, as he walked around the building.

"Brick, no windows, just this one door," the fat man observed, as he walked over to two cubes of cinderblocks, bags of mortar mix, a large tub with jugs of water standing beside it, and tools lying beside them.

The sound of the forklift cranking up reverberated inside the building as others removed the tarp from the package still resting inside the bed of the truck.

"Bring the forklift, now" the fat man ordered.

"Gently, gently, get the forks under the pallet. All the way in, then up, be careful it's heavy," he directed, as the forks slid under the steel pallet.

"Up, up, now be careful as you back up for all that you hold dear," the fat man said, as he backed away from the package.

Longwei stood outside in the rain. Thunder and lightning tore through the heavens above him as the package slid from the bed of his truck. The package was encased inside a wooden crate, a crate that would live in his dreams for the remainder of his life.

"Place it against the back wall. You two start mixing the mortar, quickly now," the fat man told two of his crew, as they crouched in the back of the truck.

An hour later it was over. Longwei's storage building was now six feet shorter on the inside than it had been. The shelving that had been moved away from the old wall, was now reinstalled against the new wall.

"Good, the shelving completely covers the wall. Now hurry, and reload the shelves, and be careful not to bang the new wall. The mortar hasn't set up yet," the fat man said, as he directed the other workers.

"Longwei, come here," the fat man ordered, as he gestured for Longwei to come in out of the rain.

"Longwei, you have done well. You have proven your loyalty to the Party and the Motherland. Go dry off, and go back to cooking dim sum. Have a good life," the fat man said, as he exchanged bows with the sodden Longwei.

Longwei bowed once more, and noticed that his hands had stopped shaking. He felt relieved that it was over. After all these years of waiting for this night, it was over.

"One more thing, Longwei, give me the bronze coin. It must be returned to its owner," the fat man said.

Longwei began to search his pockets, but couldn't find the coin.

"I think I've lost it," Longwei replied, as he ran over to his truck, and began searching for the coin.

A minute later he was dragged from the truck, and thrown to the ground in front of the fat man. He could hear two men rummaging through the cab of the truck as they looked for the coin.

"Longwei, if the coin is lost, it reflects on me. I will be punished for this failure," the fat man said, and kicked Longwei in the ribs.

He was kicking him again when the two men exited the truck and shook their heads. The fat man grabbed Longwei by the front of his sodden shirt and dragged him to his feet.

"When I was younger I had a violent temper. My mother used to say, 'If you are patient in one moment of anger, you will escape a hundred days of sorrow.' So I will not kill you for your stupidity, Longwei. We will depart as comrades. Keep the silence, and do not disappoint the Motherland," the fat man said, as he released Longwei, and bowed ever so slightly.

. . . .

Unknown to all, a young pair of eyes peered out through the blinds in the upstairs bathroom on the back of the restaurant. Lihwa was his daughter and only child. At ten years old, she had sharp eyes and a sharper mind.

Chapter 2

"The skillful leader subdues the enemy's troops without any fighting; he captures their cities without laying siege to them; he overthrows their kingdom without lengthy operations in the field."

Sun Tzu (~520 BC)

Beijing, China

22 Base Headquarters

100 meters below the Beijing Botanical Gardens

October 1, 2013, 0730 hours CT-China Time

Lieutenant General Kung Yusheng sat behind a battered oak desk. The previous owner had been Japanese Lieutenant General Masaharu Homma of the Imperial Japanese Army. The initial owner had been General Douglas MacArthur. MacArthur had used the desk prior to his evacuation from Corregidor on 12 March 1942. Homma had taken the desk as a souvenir. His family had kept it after his execution by the Americans in 1946. His connection to the Bataan Death March had left the Americans in a less than forgiving mood. Lieutenant General Kung had purchased the desk at auction in 1982.

"Comrade Lieutenant General, we have received a package from the United States. It has the number 42 on the back," Colonel Peng Zihao, said with a slight bow as he stood in the doorway of Lieutenant General Kung's office.

Kung unlocked a drawer on the left side of the desk and removed a small metal box. It was an old tin of Edgeworth sliced pipe tobacco from 1941. It had come with the desk. He set the tin on the desk and gestured for Colonel Peng to enter the room.

Peng entered and shut the door. Despite all their precautions they knew that one word heard by the wrong set of ears would be their undoing. He placed the small package in the center of the desk and stepped back.

"Fourth one this year, Comrade Lieutenant General. The Americans are becoming more cautious, but the southern border and ports are still open," Peng said.

He was nervous, despite the many years that he had worked as Lieutenant General Kung's aide.

"Yes, the Americans have a saying about closing the barn doors after the horses have already fled," Kung replied, as he removed a cotton cloth and an

old steel pocket knife from the pen drawer of the desk. The blade was engraved with an Iron Cross.

He examined the markings on the package, and then began to slice through the layers of wrapping paper. Setting these aside he found a small wooden box sealed with a dark red wax. Hand carved into the wax was the Chinese character for 'sun'.

"Beautiful wood, a claro walnut burl from Oregon or northern California," Kung observed, while cutting through the wax seal using the antique German army knife.

The knife had belonged to General Erwin Rommel in 1942 while campaigning in North Africa. Kung wiped the blade, folded it, and placed the blade and cloth back inside the desk.

"The significance of this moment is never lost on me, Peng. It never gets old," Kung said, as he stared at the two boxes sitting before him on the battered surface of the desk.

He carefully lifted the top from the tin box and set it aside. Next he lifted the top from the walnut box.

"Exquisite wood and the craftsman had enough sense not to ruin it by carving the surface. Chinese craftsmen seem compelled to carve every surface they touch," Kung said, as he studied the beautiful grain and satin finish.

Setting the top aside, he picked up the box and glanced at the item inside.

"I remember this one, Emperor Wen, 175 BC. The condition is remarkable, near mint considering the age of the coin. Both the square hole and the edge are rimmed, very rare indeed," Kung said, as he removed the ancient bronze coin from the box.

"Over 2100 years old, my friend. This coin was cast soon after China first became a unified country. Perhaps we will cast a coin when we have unified the world," Lieutenant General Kung said, as he studied the ban liang coin.

"Burn the walnut box and the wrappings. There must be no trace, no record, as usual," Kung ordered, as he continued to study the coin.

"Of course, General," Peng replied, as he bowed, and retrieved the box and wrappings.

"Don't forget the wax," Kung added, as he brushed the wax toward the front of the desk.

"Yes, General," Peng said, as he removed every trace of the package, box and wax from the desk.

With another bow he left the room and Lieutenant General Kung with his thoughts.

"One more coin," Kung mused, as he gently placed the coin on top of the growing pile in the Edgeworth tin box.

"I was a young man when we started this. So much risk the first time. I really thought the Americans would catch us and that would be the end of it. Now . . . 42 . . . we are almost there. A few more critical placements and we will have them. It becomes more difficult with the passing of each year. The Americans are wary, but they can't stop the flow of our goods into their country. They can't even stop the flow of illegal people into their country," Kung said, while lifting the lid of the tin box and staring at the faded inscription on the inside. Then he read it aloud.

"Save this tin. It has many handy uses. Larus and Brothers Company Inc., Richmond, Virginia, U.S.A.," Kung said, and smiled at the irony.

Chapter 3

"To secure ourselves against defeat lies in our own hands, but the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself."

Sun Tzu (~520 BC)

Manassas, Virginia, USA

Mission Center for Weapons and Counterproliferation

Central Intelligence Agency

November 8, 2016, 0945 hours EST

"Good morning, Amanda! Did you go vote this morning? Wow, based on your work area it looks like you've settled in to stay," Markus said, as he leaned around the corner of Amanda Langford's cubicle.

"Well, a few plants and a few pictures cuts down on the industrial look. I'm surprised the Agency still uses cubicles. The concept is a little outdated and no, I'm going to go vote tonight after work," Amanda replied, as she crawled out from under her desk.

"Second day on the job and already cracking on the Agency," Markus quipped, as he stepped into the cubicle and helped Amanda off the floor.

"It's not that! I just expected everything to be the best and latest tech. Nothing's wireless. I still haven't figured out where all the cables go," Amanda said, as she brushed off her slacks.

"If that's what you were looking for you should have hired on at Apple or Google. The Agency is 'old school' and that goes for most of the resources too," Markus said, as he lowered his voice and looked around.

"But trust me, the tech's here. It's just not available to everyone," Markus said, as he handed Amanda a multi-plug outlet strip.

"I've been looking for one of those. I was going to go out and buy one on the way home," Amanda remarked, as she snatched the multi-plug out of Markus' hand.

"Yeah, tech support holds on to these things like they were gold plated. The guy beside me moved out and his wound up in one of my drawers somehow," Markus said, as Amanda ducked back under her desk.

"Looks like you're still busy. I'll catch you later," Markus said, as he admired the view of Amanda working under her desk.

"Good morning, Markus. Based on the fact that you're not in your cubicle am I to understand that the two projects that you're working on are nearing

completion?" Janet Davidson asked, as she walked up to Markus and looked into Amanda's cubicle.

"Umm . . . no, Ms. Davidson, at least the end of next week. I was going to duck out and vote and then get back to work," Markus replied, as he smiled and quickly backed away.

"Vote on your own time, Markus. I want those reports completed by the end of this week. Is that understood?" Ms. Davidson said.

"Markus, you don't happen to have another spare power . . ." Amanda began, as she reappeared from under her desk.

"Oh, Ms. Davidson, I was just hooking up . . . some equipment," Amanda said, as she stood up.

"Ms. . . . Langford. I'm glad to see that you finally showed up for work. I was beginning to wonder if you had decided to take another position," Janet said, as she read Amanda's ID badge.

"Sorry, ma'am, but I believe I mentioned that it would be six weeks before I could start when you interviewed me," Amanda said.

"I vaguely remember the interview. By the way, we do have tech support personnel that work for the agency. They actually prefer to set up everything themselves. They keep a list of all devices hooked into our systems," Janet said, as she stared down at the diminutive young woman in front of her.

Janet Davidson was from Wisconsin and a retired Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel. At six-foot-two and 170 pounds, there were few people in the Mission Center for Weapons and Counterproliferation (MCWC) that she didn't intimidate.

"Yes, ma'am, I know that, but they couldn't get to me until tomorrow and I didn't want to sit around and twiddle my thumbs until then," Amanda said, immediately regretting the tone of her voice.

"First of all I'm not in the Marines anymore. You may address me as Ms. Davidson or Assistant Director Davidson, but not 'ma'am'. Is that understood?" Janet said, as she leaned over the five-foot-three Amanda.

"Sorry, it's just a sign of respect we use for our elders back home," Amanda said, and forced herself to not look down at her feet.

"When I was a . . . younger woman . . . I was a Marine. I thought that I had left behind the days of dealing with young girls that still had the smell of the farm on them," Janet said, as she locked eyes with the young woman.

"Ms. Davidson or Assistant Director Davidson, I may have grown up on a farm in North Carolina, Page Farms outside Raleigh in fact. We grew strawberries, blueberries and pumpkins, but I graduated first in my class at Broughton High School, the highest rated high school in the state. I had to get up every morning at 4AM to catch a bus into the city, and had a perfect

attendance record. I graduated Magna Cum Laude from North Carolina State University with a BS in Nuclear Engineering and a BA in International Studies. I speak Mandarin, Korean and Japanese and will complete my Masters from George Washington in Modern Chinese Military History next year with a specialty in their Nuclear Weapons Programs. So I am not fresh from the farm!" Amanda said, and began wondering how long it would take her to get another job.

"Good! You may look like a puppy, but you don't roll over like one," Janet replied, and smiled.

"After you finish hooking up all your equipment call IT and tell them I said you need Level 3 access immediately. While you're waiting, read this file. It's in Chinese. The last page contains a file name and location that you'll need Level 3 to read. Come to my office on the 9th floor tomorrow morning at 0800. I want a detailed analysis of what you think. Any questions? Good, I'll see you tomorrow morning," Janet ordered, as she turned and walked away.

Amanda stared at the woman's broad shoulders as she walked away and took a deep breath. She glanced at the folder in her hand and threw it on her desk, then dropped onto her knees and crawled back under her desk.

"First things first," Amanda said, as she began plugging things into the multi-plug.

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"So what do you think, Janet?" Caleb McElroy asked, as he stared out the ninth floor window.

"If I didn't think she was the right person then I wouldn't have hired her, but we'll find out for sure tomorrow morning," Janet said, as she stood beside the CIA Director of the Mission Center for Weapons and Counterproliferation.

"I really hope you're wrong about this. I really fucking hope you're wrong," Caleb said, as he sipped on his glass of 10-year-old Laphroaig scotch whiskey.

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It was 4AM. Amanda had been staring at her dual screens and the file alternately for over twenty minutes. Her mind whirled as she continued to run the data back and forth in her mind.

"This can't be right. Why would she give this to me? This is some kind of a test to see if I'll draw the wrong conclusions. She wants to see if I'm just a redneck country girl who'll follow the wrong lead. It has to be. It just has to be," Amanda said, as she massaged her temples.

"It's way too much material and there are other things, other pieces that scare the shit out of me. This can't be real. It has to be a test," Amanda said, as she laid her head on her desk and fell asleep.