

One tiny, red, liquid drop of blood was visible in the center of the small, neat hole in China Bob Chan's forehead an inch or so above his right eye. Chan's eyes were wide open. Tommy Carmellini thought his features registered a look of surprise.

Carmellini pulled off his right latex glove, bent down, and touched the cheek of the corpse--which was still warm.

Death must have been instantaneous, and not many minutes ago, Carmellini thought as he pulled the glove back onto his hand. The diminutive corpse of China Bob Chan lay sprawled behind his Philippine mahogany desk in the library of his mansion on the south side of Hong Kong Island.

When Carmellini had eased the library door open a few seconds ago, he had seen the shod foot protruding from behind the desk. He scanned the room, then entered the library.

The side of the room opposite the door consisted of a series of large plate-glass windows accented with heavy burgundy drapes. Through the windows was a magnificent view of the harbor at Aberdeen. Beyond the harbor was the channel between Hong Kong Island and Lamma Island. A few lights could be seen on sparsely populated Lamma, and beyond that island, the total darkness of the South China Sea. Tonight the lights of the great city of Hong Kong, out of sight on the north side of the island's spine, illuminated a low deck of stratus clouds with a dull glow.

The band at the party on the floor below this one was playing an old American pop hit; the tune was recognizable even though the amplified lyrics were muffled by overstuffed furniture and shelves of books that reached from floor to ceiling.

Tommy Carmellini looked around, trying to find the spent cartridge. There, a gleam of brass near the leg of that chair. In the subdued light of the library he almost missed it.

He stepped over, bent down, looked.

7.65 millimeter.

That cartridge was designed for small, easy-to-conceal pocket pistols. Difficult to shoot accurately, they were serious weapons only at point-blank range.

Standing in front of the desk, he put his hands on his hips and carefully scanned the room. Somewhere in this room Harold Barnes hid a tape recorder eleven days ago when he installed the wiring for a satellite dish system.

Presumably Chan had ordered the system so that he could watch American television. Perhaps he was a fan of C-Span, which was broadcasting the congressional hearings concerning foreign--i.e., Chinese--donations to the American political parties in the last election; in the past ten days his name had certainly been mentioned numerous times in those hearings.

Alas, Barnes had left no record of where he hid the recorder. He had been shot in the head the night after he completed the installation.

Carmellini was certain Barnes would have used a recorder, not a remote transmitter, which would have been too easy to detect and find. One reason he was certain was that he had known Barnes, a quiet, careful, colorless technician who had gone through the CIA tradecraft course with Carmellini. Who would have suspected that Barnes would be the first of that class to die in the line of duty?

The mikes...Harold ostensibly spent four hours on the television satellite dish system, a system he should have been able to install in two. If he followed normal practice, he would have hardwired at least two tiny microphones, one for each track of the recorder.

The chandelier over the mahogany desk caught Tommy's eye. Ornate, with several dozen small bulbs, it would attract Harold Barnes like sugar attracts a fly.

Carmellini studied the chain that held the chandelier. There was a wire running down it... no, two wires--one black wire and the other smaller, carefully wound around the chain.

Barnes could have put a mike in the chandelier, another anywhere in the room--maybe the desk or over by the reading area--and hidden the recorder behind some books, perhaps on the top shelf. Surely there were tomes that didn't get removed from the shelves once a decade.

Carmellini stepped to the nearest bookcase, studied the spines of the books that filled the thing. Not a flake of dust.

A diligent maid would not be good.

So...

He pulled a chair over under the chandelier, then stood on it.

Aha! There it was, taped in the junction of the main arms of the chandelier. With the bulbs of the chandelier burning brightly, the tiny recorder would have been almost impossible to see from the floor.

Carmellini reached. In seconds he had the two reels out. Maybe three-quarters of the tape had been used, about six hours' worth.

Back on the floor, he was tempted to put the reels into his pocket, then thought better of it. He pulled up a trouser leg and carefully shoved them down into one sock.

He had a new tape in his other sock, but with China Bob dead, the recorder seemed superfluous. Should he cut the wires and remove the device?

How much time did he have?

If China Bob Chan killed Harold Barnes, why was the recorder still there? Was he waiting for someone to come for the tape?

Suddenly aware that time was fleeing, Tommy Carmellini pushed the chair back to its former position. He vigorously rubbed the upholstered seat of the chair to remove any marks his shoes had made.

As he straightened, he heard a noise. It seemed to come from the secretary's office. When he stepped in that direction the light in the smaller office came on.

Carmellini moved swiftly and flattened against the wall. The door to the secretary's office was to his right. He listened intently for footsteps.

Carmellini desperately wanted to avoid being caught in this room with a dead man on the floor and a tape in his sock. True, he had diplomatic immunity as the assistant agricultural officer at the consulate, but the publicity and hullabaloo of an arrest and interrogation, not to mention expulsion from the country, would not be career-enhancing.

He heard the scrape of a chair being moved.

Coiled, ready to lash out if anyone came through the door, he approached it, staying back far enough that he remained away from the glare of the light.

Someone was sitting behind the secretary's desk, someone small. My God, it was a kid! A boy, perhaps ten or twelve.

Carmellini stepped back so he would be out of sight if the youngster glanced this way.

Now he heard a computer boot up.

There was one other exit from this room, at the far end. Carmellini didn't know if the door was locked, but it led to another suite of offices which opened into the hallway near the elevator.

He walked toward the door, moving quietly and decisively.

The knob refused to turn. Locked. There was a keyhole, but he could not see the brand name or type of lock.

He removed a leather packet from his pocket and unfolded it, revealing a carefully chosen selection of picks. He took one, inserted it in the lock.

As he bent down to work on the lock, he saw for the first time the heads of the bolts in the door. They had been painted the same dark color as the door to make them less noticeable.

Even if he got the lock open, the door was bolted shut.

He put the pick away and stowed the packet in an inside jacket pocket as he walked back toward the secretary's open door.

Standing at least six feet from the door, he moved so he could see inside.

The kid was at the computer, typing.

Now he sat back in the chair, waiting. . .

In seconds a naked woman appeared on the screen, a woman holding what appeared to be a giant penis in her hand. Now she--

Jesus, the kid is into porno!

Just what the woman was going to do with the penis, Tommy Carmellini never discovered, for at that instant the door from the hallway opened and a woman walked in. The boy took one look at the intruder and closed the screen, but not before the woman got a good look at it.

She cuffed him once, said something in Chinese.

The boy ran through the icons, closed the Internet connection as the woman spouted Chinese as quickly as her lips would move.

Carmellini stepped back against the wall and waited.

He heard the computer go off, heard the scrape of the chair and footsteps, then the door to the hallway close firmly.

He peered into the office.

Empty.

He opened the hallway door a crack, just enough to see the woman and boy disappear into the elevator at the end of the hallway.

He paused for a second, then went back into the library and scooted the chair under the chandelier. Installing the new tape in the recorder took about thirty seconds; then he found the on-off switch and turned off the recorder. He put the chair back where it belonged and rubbed the seat again.

At the door in the secretary's office, Carmellini checked to ensure no one was coming, then stepped into the hallway and pulled the door shut until it latched. Strains of Gershwin's "An American in Paris" were audible here.

As he walked toward the staircase that led to the rooms below where the party was being held, Carmellini stripped off his latex gloves and put them in his pocket.

Downstairs he found Kerry Kent sipping champagne and talking animatedly with a long-haired intellectual type who was gazing hopefully at her. Kerry was a tall English woman with a spectacular mass of reddish brown hair who spoke both Cantonese and Mandarin fluently. On most working days she labored as a translator at the Greater China Mutual Aid Society, an insurance firm, but in reality she was an officer in the British Secret Intelligence Service, the SIS. Tonight she was wearing an elegant dark blue dress that just brushed her ankles and a modest borrowed diamond necklace.

"Oh, there you are, darling," she said lightly, laying a hand on Tommy's arm. "I have been talking to this brilliant playwright-" She said his name. "His new play is opening next week in the West End. My sister told me quite a lot about it, actually. What a coincidence! When we get back to London we must see it."

Carmellini shook hands with the scribbler and gently led Kerry away. "Did anyone watch me come in?" he asked, just loud enough for her to hear over the hubbub of cocktail party chatter and music.

"I don't think anyone was paying much attention. What were you doing up there?"

"Watching porno on the Internet. Fascinating stuff! I'll tell you all about it later. Who is this sicko stalking you?"

He was referring to a Chinese man who was standing six feet away and openly staring at Kerry. When she moved, he moved.

"An admirer from the provinces, obviously, hopelessly smitten. All my life I've had this devastating effect on men. It's such a bore. I'm thinking of having chest reduction surgery to end these unwanted attentions."

That comment was intended as a joke, for Kerry had a slim, athletic figure.

Carmellini snarled at the staring man and guided Kent away by the elbow.

"Did you get it?" She meant the tape.

"It wasn't there. China Bob is stretched out behind his desk with a hole in his head."

"Dead?" A furrow appeared between her eyebrows.

"Very."

"You found the recorder?"

"In the chandelier. But the tape was missing."

Kerry Kent sipped champagne as she digested Carmellini's lie. Just why lying to her was a good idea he couldn't say, but his instinct told him not to trust anyone. Someone shot Harold Barnes, and another someone, perhaps the same one, put a bullet in China Bob Chan's head--and Carmellini had known Ms. Kent for precisely three days, not exactly a long-term relationship.

There were at least three ways to get from this floor of the mansion to the floor above: two staircases and an elevator.

Carmellini had slipped up one set of stairs after he went to the men's room, which was out of sight of the ballroom, just down the hall toward the back stairs. Anyone in this room could have done precisely the same thing in the last few hours, and probably several of them had.

Perhaps the tape held the answer.

Carmellini scanned the crowd one more time, trying to fix the guests in his mind. The cream of Hong Kong society was here tonight.

"Tell me again," he said to Kerry Kent, "who these folks are."

She scanned the crowd, nodded toward a man in his sixties in the center of a small crowd. "That's Governor Sun Siu Ki, surrounded by his usual entourage--officials and bureaucrats and private industry suck-ups. The gentleman of distinction talking to him is Sir Robert MacDonald, the British consul general. The tall, blond Aussie semi-eavesdropping on those two is Rip Buckingham, managing editor of the China Post, the largest English-language daily in Hong Kong. Beside him is his wife, Sue Lin. Over in the far corner is the American consul general, Virgil Cole, talking to China Bob's sister, Amy Chan. Let's see, who else?"

"The fellow in the uniform with the highball, standing by the band."

"General Tang, commanding the division of People's Liberation Army troops stationed in Hong Kong. He's been in Hong Kong only a few weeks. The papers ran articles about him when he arrived."

"The man talking to him?"

"Albert Cheung. Educated at Oxford, the foremost attorney in Hong Kong. Smooth and silky and in the know, or so I've heard."

She continued, pointing out six industrialists, three shipping magnates, and two bank presidents. "These people are the scions of the merchant and shipping clans that grew filthy rich in Hong Kong," she said, and named names. "If ever a group mourned the departure of the British, there they are," she added. "Never saw so much of the upper crust chatting it up together."

Any person in the room could have gone upstairs and popped China Bob, Carmellini reflected. All of them had probably excused themselves and gone in search of the facilities once or twice during the evening. Or someone could have ridden the elevator from the basement or walked to the library from another area of the house. The field was wide open. Still, Tommy Carmellini took one more careful look at each of the people Kerry had pointed out, then said, "Perhaps we should leave now before the excitement begins."

"A marvelous suggestion. Let me say a few good-byes as we drift toward the door."

Five minutes later, as they stood waiting for the consulate's pool car to be brought around, Carmellini asked Kerry, "So what's on the agenda for the rest of the evening?"

"I don't know," she said lightly and turned toward him. He accepted the invitation and kissed her. She put her arms around him and kissed back.

"You are such a romantic," she said when her lips were free.

"And single, too."

"I haven't forgotten."

"I don't recall mentioning my marital status before."

"You didn't. Your reputation preceded you. Tommy Carmellini, unmarried burglar, thief, second-story man . . ."

"And all-around good egg."

"James Bond without the dash and panache."

"Don't knock the recipe until you've tried it."

"You'll have to sell me."

"I'm willing to give it a go, as you Brits say."

"Tell me about the Internet pornography. Little details like that spice up action reports, make them interesting."

The consulate pool car pulled to a stop in front of them, and the valet got out. "I was saving that morsel for later," Carmellini said as he tipped the man and accepted the keys. "After all, the night is young."

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