

# Prologue: Liang Wei

KUERLE, 2023

“Do you have any last words?”

Liang Wei lay strapped to the operating table, ignoring the surgeon’s question. His eyes looked past him, scanning the room with a detached curiosity. The walls were a pristine white, the equipment state-of-the-art and gleaming. The room was eerily silent, except for the occasional beep of the machines surrounding him. An array of scalpels was lined up next to him on a tray. To his right he saw a row of identical boxes the size of small travel bags sitting on a long, stainless steel table. On top of each one was a small syringe.

He looked at the two young nurses that darted around the room. He pondered the future they faced in a world increasingly controlled by the very technology he had helped pioneer. With artificial intelligence and surveillance technology advancing at a breakneck pace, he knew their lives would be more closely scrutinized, controlled and manipulated than every generation that has come before. He had tried to guide the development of these new marvels of technology in the right direction. The leather straps holding him down were a somber reminder that he failed.

A third nurse, standing next to the surgeon, was diligently preparing his arm for the impending needle insertion. Her age was

difficult to tell behind the mask. As he locked eyes with her, he noticed a small birthmark in the shape of a half-moon above her right temple. A look of anguish was in her eyes. An inexplicable urge welled up within him to offer her consolation, to assure her that all would be well, but before he could open his mouth, she finished the preparation and retreated to a corner of the room where a tall, silent man loomed, his eyes observing the proceedings with a stern gaze. Liang Wei instantly recognized the imposing figure as Zhang Rui, the unwavering officer who had been his warden throughout his last months of imprisonment.

“Mr. Liang. Any last words?”

Wei’s eyes shifted back to the surgeon. He was an unassuming man, somewhat portly with a modest build. Faint lines were etched around his eyes, betraying years of experience. His small hands, held upright, were covered with blue surgical gloves. In his right hand he held a scalpel. Though the man was a stranger to him, he was the key to implementing his last directives. Wei couldn’t help but experience a blend of anxiety and expectancy as he studied the man, acutely aware that his plan was entirely dependent on these tiny hands.

Wei’s mind raced back to his own past. He had been born in the mid-1970s, at a time when China was just beginning to emerge from the shadow of the Cultural Revolution. A child of poor parents, he had grown up in a small apartment in Hefei, surrounded by the sights and sounds of a city and country in transition. Despite the many challenges he had faced, Wei had been a precocious child. Growing up, he had always been fascinated by technology and computers, and he spent every spare moment tinkering with electronic equipment. As he grew older, his ambitions grew with him. After graduating at the top of his class in computer sciences

and informatics, he entered the workforce at the end of the last millennia; the advent of a new era where he had been witness to the rapid rise of the Chinese economy, full of endless opportunities for those with the right skills and drive. He had been one of those people, dedicating himself entirely to building his own business empire. With a sharp mind and strong determination, he quickly made a name for himself in China's booming tech industry. After failing with his first startup, he achieved his breakthrough with his second company PayMo which revolutionized the way people could make transactions with their mobile phones. It was an uphill battle, but Liang Wei's hard work and headstrong character paid off. His company grew rapidly and expanded across the country. At its peak, they offered payment services to over half a billion people.

The combination of his headstrong character and his company's prominent role in China's financial system proved to be his downfall in the end. If he had shown a bit more restraint and voiced his criticism of the People's Bank of China more diplomatically, things might have developed differently. Yet, he did not regret his actions. Changing his inherent character was beyond his control, even if it contributed to his undoing. Now, with his own life coming to an end, he took comfort in knowing that he played a significant part in his people's unprecedented rise from a poverty-stricken nation that had been subjected to foreign and internal terror for decades to a prosperous and thriving modern society with a controlling seat at the table of world powers. His unshakable spirit had played a small but important role in facilitating this incredible transformation, and he accepted his fate with a sense of quiet pride. He took solace in knowing that, even in death, his legacy would endure, a testament to a life lived fiercely and without compromise. The realization provided him with an unusual sense of calm.

He drew a measured breath to steady his nerves and looked into the surgeon's eyes. "I am ready; you know what you have to do."

The surgeon offered a nearly imperceptible nod, indiscernible to anyone else in the room but him, and signaled the anesthesiologist to begin. Gradually, the fluid coursed through Wei's veins and he departed from this world.

# Chapter One: Jack

SAN DIEGO, 2026

Jack's naked feet pounded against the wet sand, each stride taking him further along the San Diego shoreline as sunrise broke over the beach, revealing the laborious path of footprints left behind him. His breaths came in steady, labored gasps, forming foggy ghosts in the air, vanishing as quickly as they appeared.

In his late forties, Jack was no longer the tall, athletic figure he had once been. Years of working behind a desk had begun to take their toll on his body, leaving him bearing a closer resemblance to the archetypal office worker rather than the active government agent he still was. His transformation had been subtle but undeniable. His muscles had softened, and his once flat stomach showed the rounding signs of a sedentary life. His legs, which used to carry him on long runs with ease, struggled under the added burden of weight and inactivity. Sweat trickled down his face, the aches and pains in his muscles and joints reminded him of the passage of time. While he knew he could not regain his once-youthful energy, he was determined to at least halt the decline and maintain a level of health and fitness that would serve him well as he continued to age. He pressed on, focusing on the rhythm of his breaths, the steady thrum of his heartbeat, and the feeling of sand giving way beneath his feet.

As he jogged along the beach, thoughts of his extensive career filled his mind. Over the past twenty years, he had worked in different parts of the world in the name of national security, with longer assignments in France, the Philippines, and in China, safeguarding U.S. personnel stationed in those countries. In his early days, he had served as a security officer on the ground, directly responsible for protecting his colleagues. As he advanced through the ranks and became the Regional Security Officer, his role evolved, and he had found himself immersed in the logistics of managing a team and the oversight of identifying potential dangers ahead of time to employ suitable countermeasures. He had enjoyed the increased responsibilities and the additional insights into the safety landscape and political machinery of the countries he was stationed in. Throughout the later part of his career, he had been at the heart of global geopolitics, working diligently to protect U.S. interests. From his work with NATO allies in Europe to coordinating with intelligence agencies in Asia, he had navigated a world of diplomacy and covert operations driven by a sense of duty and loyalty to his country. The hard work and the adrenaline that came along with it had once been a source of pride for him.

Jack's family had been the collateral damage in his pursuit of duty, and as the sun rose higher above the horizon, he allowed himself to reflect on what he had lost. His marriage had suffered from the constant relocations, fleeting friendships and ever-changing social circles. After the birth of their daughter Vanessa, their way of life had become unbearable for his wife. She had longed for a stable and secure environment to raise their family, something his line of work could not provide. Jack, driven by a sense of duty, had believed that his personal sacrifices were essential to protect freedom and democracy around the globe. He had tried to explain

the importance of this commitment to his wife, hoping to make her understand that his devotion to their family and his work were two sides of the same coin. Yet, as days turned into months and months into years, the chasm between them had expanded until his marriage finally ended in a storm of recriminations and bitter words. As he continued working abroad, his ex-wife had taken their daughter and settled for a quieter and more stable life in California.

Initially, he managed to go on by throwing himself headfirst into every new assignment and increasing his workload in an attempt to compensate for the void when he returned to an empty home at night. Over the years, however, he began to grow disillusioned with his job and the sacrifices he had made for it. Observing the increasing polarization of U.S. domestic politics from abroad and having the benefit of getting an unfiltered outsider view from the regional media reporting on the U.S, he began to realize that in all those years that he had defended his country against external threats, he had failed to see that the real danger grew from within the nation itself, slowly eroding away the very bedrock of the sacred principles he had vowed to defend. Corruption and cronyism, abetted by an ever-growing percentage of the uneducated and complacent, had burrowed deep into the heart of democracy. It became impossible for him to ignore his country shifting, becoming more and more like the systems he had fought against. He saw a gerontocratic political elite hardened by their unyielding grip on power, increasingly disconnected from the people they were meant to serve. Closing in on the final years of their lives, the septuagenarians and octogenarians presiding over the trifecta of governance were overwhelmed by the speed of technological development and societal progress, unable to comprehend the widening gap between them and the harsh realities faced by their people. He began to wonder how a nation, once a

beacon of democracy, could have strayed so far from its founding principles. He was not disillusioned to an extent that he felt like he had wasted his years in service. On the contrary, he held steadfast to the hope that his country would once again manage to reinvent itself as it had successfully done countless times before in its history. However, maybe because of his progressing age, he did not see himself playing a major role in this next chapter. He had thus decided to turn his energies homewards to his family.

In pursuit of rectifying his past decisions, he had traded his ever-changing international escapades for a permanent position back in San Diego, where he was in charge of arranging the global deployments of his fellow security agents. It was a step back career-wise, working on mundane tasks in a mundane office with mundane colleagues, but it meant a chance to rebuild the bridge to his estranged daughter and to become more to her than just a distant memory. It took time, and there was still much work to be done, but the once sporadic visits with Vanessa had started to occur with increasing regularity. And while his relationship with his ex-wife had not exactly flourished, it had at least thawed enough for polite conversations and to acknowledge that both parents should be present in their daughter's life. This gradual thaw had its rewards; Vanessa had invited him to her eighteenth birthday party, marking a pivotal moment in his efforts to rebuild their father-daughter bond. For Jack, this invitation carried more weight than any accomplishment from his professional career. Filled with anticipation, he counted down the days, eagerly awaiting the moment when he could join his daughter for the unforgettable event.

Jack's contemplation was abruptly disrupted by the insistent vibration of his phone. He halted mid-stride, fumbled the phone



from his pocket, glanced at the unknown number on the screen, and answered.

“Hello?”

“Jack Decker?” a woman’s voice inquired.

“Yes, who’s this?” he replied, catching his breath.

“Susan Robertson, Assistant Secretary of State for Diplomatic Security. I apologize for interrupting your morning routine but we have an urgent situation on our hands. Your presence is required in Beijing immediately.”

Jack had never interacted directly with Susan Robertson, but he recognized her voice from her various appearances in the media. As a senior official in the State Department, she was directly appointed by the President and was responsible for the safety and security of U.S. diplomatic missions and personnel worldwide. These responsibilities also covered the direct oversight of the Diplomatic Security Service, the federal law enforcement arm of the Department of State Jack served under. He wondered why she had contacted him directly despite the substantial difference in their ranks.

“Ms. Assistant Secretary, I don’t understand. I haven’t worked on foreign posts in years. Did Tom approve this?”

“Mr. Decker, let me assure you that your supervisor’s approval is implied when I call you. Let me also assure you that I’m well aware of your reasons for stepping back from overseas assignments, and as a parent, I fully understand your decision. However, Laura specifically requested your presence.”

“Laura? Laura Jarvis, our ambassador to China?”

“Correct.”

Jack’s mind raced as he tried to understand the gravity of the situation. While he had worked closely with the ambassador during his time as the chief of the security details at the U.S. Embassy in China,

their relationship had been restricted to a professional level. It had been years since they last spoke. What could Laura Jarvis possibly need from him now? And why him? The thought of leaving behind his newfound stability and the promise of reconnecting with his daughter weighed heavily on him.

“Ms. Assistant Secretary, I appreciate the trust placed in me, but I must ask about the nature of this assignment. What is happening in Beijing?”

Susan’s tone shifted, a hint of concern now evident in her voice. “You’ll be briefed on the plane, Mr Decker. Laura has full confidence in your abilities, and so do I. The sooner you’ll arrive, the sooner we can brief you and get you involved.”

Jack knew that this call could jeopardize his fragile progress with his daughter and ex-wife, but the thought of his country needing him in such a critical situation was difficult to ignore. “Alright,” he conceded, feeling the familiar pull of responsibility tugging at him. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Are you at home?”

“Close by.”

“Good. A car will pick you up in an hour. One of our C-37Bs is waiting to take you to Beijing. Pack light. You’ll receive a briefing packet and all necessary accessories on the plane. I understand this decision isn’t easy for you, but your dedication is an important first step to solving this situation.”

“Yes, madam.”

“Thank you, Mr Decker. I’m sorry that we have to send you over. I know how important it is for you to be in San Diego. Stay safe and good luck.”

The call ended, and Jack stood on the empty beach, the waves lapping at his feet. His private life, which he had been trying so

hard to piece back together, was again upended by his profession's demands. He took a deep breath and released his frustration with a scream against the wind.