



**RIDING  
THE  
SNAKE**

A N O V E L

**STEPHEN J. CANNELL**



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*To my wife, Marcia; my children, Tawnia, Chelsea, and  
Cody; and my mother, Carolyn, who all support me*

*And to Ralph Salisbury, who turned the lights on*

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## **Riding the Snake**

*It is man that makes truth great . . .  
Not truth that makes man great.*

—CONFUCIUS

## P R O L O G U E

1994

### The Year of the Dog

**H**e sat in the back of his beautiful new three-engine Falcon jet as a setting sun turned the silver wings bright orange. He watched in fascinated silence as his “dirty” blood was transferred, snaking out of his arm in the transparent plastic tubes, then shooting into the large dialyzer where it was washed of urine and body toxins. Then his blood would return from this grotesque laundry and be inserted back into him. The process was debilitating and caused “Willy” Wo Lap Ling tremendous fatigue. He looked up at his full-time physician, a young Chinese doctor from Hong Kong named Li Dayu. He was narrow shouldered and skinny with thick prescription wireless glasses. Dr. Li checked the dialysis machine, which was built into the private jet’s lavatory. He pushed his glasses up on his nose and noted the blood flow rate that measured the fluid processed by the hissing, gurgling monstrosity. Next, the doctor checked the permanent plastic tips that had been surgically implanted in Willy’s arm and abdomen, and to which the dialysis machine was now attached. Then he looked at the withered sixty-nine-year-old Triad leader critically.

"I think it is time. We must go to Beijing," he said in Mandarin Chinese. "I sent your blood panels to them. They have notified me they have a donor."

"I have enemies there," Willy sighed. "I have ignored the wishes of Chairman Deng. I cannot lose face. I cannot now crawl there like a wounded animal, drag myself up onto his porch, and ask forgiveness."

"*Zou Hou Men*," the doctor said, looking into Wo Lap's jaundiced eyes, using the Chinese expression meaning "Go in the back door." "Use your Guan-Xi with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences." Guan-Xi was the time-honored Chinese tradition of influence that still controlled most social and business relations in China. The head of that new Academy was Chen Boda, who also headed the Chinese Communist Party's Military Commission and was, arguably, the most powerful man in China. Even more powerful than the ailing Chairman Deng Xiaoping.

The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences had been formed only one month before and had been heralded by President Clinton as an important step by Chinese Communists to find bridges of understanding with the West. Willy Wo Lap Ling had been invited by Chen Boda to be part of the Academy. The invitation had surprised him, because he lived in Hong Kong under British rule and had engaged in a life of crime there, but Willy had been told it was extended because he was an expert on U.S. commerce. After all, didn't he steal billions in cash annually from an unaware and stupid America?

Chen Boda had identified the United States as China's sole global enemy in his address before the Communist Party's Central Committee during a closed meeting at Beijing's Jiangxi Hotel in January of 1994, the Year of the Dog. In the view of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Willy Wo Lap Ling was actively engaged in poisoning the American fabric from within with his drugs, guns, and illegal immigration. He was known to have great influence with corrupt American officials. He had invested heavily in American politics and had influence with many U.S. Senators and

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Congressmen. Willy Wo Lap had even been to the White House and had his picture taken with President Bill Clinton. The picture was hanging in his Hong Kong office and displayed for all his incredible Guan-Xi with the American leader. It was this criminal activity and political influence that caused Chen Boda to invite Willy to be an adviser to the powerful new Academy, which was hardly a bridge to better understanding with the West. It was a Chinese think tank solely dedicated to the total and absolute destruction of American interests around the world.

Wo Lap Ling had been born in the New Territories inside the Walled City of Kowloon in 1925. At the time there were nineteen members of his family living in a one-room concrete flat. The Walled City was the perfect place for Willy. History had prepared that ghetto for him years before he was born.

The New Territories had been ceded to the British from China for ninety-nine years in 1898. The Walled City of Kowloon, as a result of a poorly worded agreement, became disputed property, with both the British and the Chinese claiming sovereignty over it. It was a pocket of lawlessness, governed by neither country, where crime and violence flourished. Soon criminal Triads became the ruling power in the Walled City, where there was no wall. The Japanese had it torn down by POWs when they occupied that area during World War II. The ghetto kept its name because the place had been designed without streets. Narrow alleys randomly transected the crowded mass of buildings. As the population and need for new housing grew, the ghetto swelled. "New" top floors were built precariously over old. With no Planning Commission or City Council to oversee design, stress, and load requirements, the new floors were balanced unevenly, like randomly stacked boxes, giving the ghetto the look of a wall of concrete. The narrow alleys became tunnels which were closed in by top stories. Even at noon, no sunlight penetrated these walkways. Water and electricity were stolen from nearby conduits. Makeshift water mains leaked; jerry-rigged wiring sparked and zapped in the fetid darkness. Sewage and the entrails of animals were thrown down into the dark pathways from



one-room factories that churned out pork balls and fish cakes. In most places, the narrow walkways were filled almost two stories high with human excrement and rotting garbage. At some places, the alleys were only a few inches wide.

The small industries that operated in the Walled City hummed twenty-four hours a day, turning out everything from hair oil and bicycle parts to sex toys for Western consumers. Theft, murder, and intrigue always hovered in the dark.

It was in this criminal environment that Wo Lap Ling grew up. His family lived on the fifth floor of a ramshackle old building. Since there were no streets, no apartment had an address, and children from an early age learned to navigate in the teeming black tunnels, finding their homes by instinct almost like blind ants returning to the nest.

Wo Lap Ling had to share a bed with five other members of his extended family. They used a "hot-cot" method. He had the bed from nine in the morning until four in the afternoon, then he would turn it over to his cousin, Sun Yee. By five P.M., he was out in the swarming alleys of a city that housed factories, opium shops, and humanity with equal disregard.

No Occidentals dared go into the Walled City of Kowloon, except, that is, for Jackie Pullinger. She had lived there since she arrived from England in 1929. She was an evangelist missionary who taught the children the vague customs of the West that were now the rule in Hong Kong. She also ran a drug rehabilitation program. Her success rate was staggering. Since she provided a service for these Chinese children, she had at first been tolerated, and eventually became a fixture that everyone accepted. She had taught Wo Lap Ling English and had given him his Western name, Willy.

Jackie Pullinger was the only Occidental he had ever loved.

Willy had been so adept at feats of criminal balance that he had risen from a street urchin who ran errands for the area Triad leader to become, at the age of twenty-three, the powerful Incense Master or Vanguard of the Chin Lo Triad. As Vanguard, it was

his duty to wreak punishment on delinquent Triad members, a job he performed with great relish. He became an expert on all forms of punishment, including the painful Death by a Myriad of Swords. He resurrected several ancient tortures involving rats and insects. He rose quickly to become the White Fan (Consigliere), and now Willy Wo Lap was the "most powerful Shan Chu" and ran the entire Chin Lo Triad in Hong Kong. The Triad's current annual take from its worldwide illegal activities was eighty billion dollars and growing.

The largest market for his criminal empire was America, which had focused almost all of its law enforcement energies on the Italian Mafia and Colombian drug cartels. Willy was astounded. Together they netted only twenty billion. Yet the stupid Americans concentrated on them while Willy's Triad poisoned American society with guns, drugs, and illegal immigration, extorting three times that amount, while having his picture taken with the American President. It had been an exciting, exhilarating ride.

Now at age sixty-nine, the trail seemed to be coming to an end. He had applied to Sloan-Kettering hospital in New York for new kidneys and been told by the Americans that there was a donor. He had flown there in his new three-engine Falcon jet, only to find out at the last minute that a mistake had been discovered in the tissue match. He had been turned away without explanation or regard for his desperate condition.

"You will die if you do not get new kidneys immediately," his doctor said, interrupting Willy's thoughts.

Willy's life had been a mixture of violence and power. Women, enemies, and wealth had all been conquered, like helpless children. Wo Lap Ling had been riding a vicious tiger. In his youth, he sat the beast easily. The tiger carried him fast and far and, at his direction, had savaged his enemies. But now he was desperately holding on, barely able to stay aboard. If he fell, he knew the tiger would turn and savage him.

"Tell the pilot to refile the flight plan for Beijing," he whispered.

The doctor turned and moved away as the blood-cleansing, lifesaving machine, squatting on the toilet behind him, hissed and throbbed at the end of two plastic tubes that coiled out of him like hooded cobras—one snake sucking his blood, the other spitting it back inside him.

The problem with riding a tiger was that when the ride was over, it was impossible to get off the vicious animal's back.

The Friendship Hospital in Beijing was clean but not very friendly. Gray walls and yellow tile floors made the sterile environment foreboding. The Communist doctor had given him a complete physical as well as a new blood work-up. He checked Willy's vital signs, then told the dying Triad leader that he was in immediate need of a kidney transplant. Any wait would make his chance of survival more difficult. This was hardly news. When Willy asked in Mandarin Chinese if this could be accomplished, the doctor only looked down at him and clucked his tongue in a very peculiar way before leaving Willy's private room.

Willy Wo Lap's dreams had been getting very bizarre. He assumed, in his waking moments, that it was probably all the toxins in his blood that were poisoning his mind. But there was a part of him that wondered if he was getting a sneak preview into the dark hallway of his spiritual future. If so, the dim light under that door was grim and held evil promise.

The dream he was having in the Beijing hospital was strange indeed: He was sitting up in bed but needed to urinate. The floor was alive with writhing poisonous snakes. They hissed and bared their fangs at him. He needed to walk to the bathroom but had no shoes. The snakes would surely strike his bare feet and kill him. Two large, snow-white Akita dogs were also in the dream, sleeping at the foot of his bed. Willy called to them. They looked up, then came over and sat obediently next to him, one on each side. Suddenly a knife magically appeared in Willy's hand. He turned and drove the knife deep into each dog's back. They sat patiently as he

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opened them up, making long cuts, exposing their innards. He stuffed his bare feet down inside them, pulling the carcasses up like huge furry white bedroom slippers. Then he stepped down off the bed, into the sea of snakes, walking carefully in his new dog shoes . . . but then, slowly and powerfully, the dogs began to move in their own directions—one right, one left. In panic, he knew he had been fooled by their trusting beauty. He could not control them. Soon he was caught in awkward peril, unable to stand, his legs spread, his genitals dangling inches above the snapping reptiles. Willy was hopelessly off-balance and began falling face down into the sea of hissing snakes.

He woke up with a start and was looking up at the smooth liver-spotted face of Chen Boda. The Chinese politician had been sitting in the room, staring down quietly at him, saying nothing. It was strange, even frightening, to wake up in the middle of the night and find one of the most powerful men in China—perhaps the whole world—sitting silently at his bedside, observing him, making plans while he slept, but saying nothing. Chen Boda was seventy-one, his hair slicked back on his small, bony head. His skin was the color of an old calligraphy scroll, an aged wheaten yellow. He was only five feet tall. Western diplomats refused to take him seriously because of his size, thinking him diminutive in spirit as well as stature. It was a mistake they were just now beginning to regret. He had soft brown eyes, an angelic complexion, and a ruthless core.

“This has been an eventful year,” the Chinese politician said to the dying Hong Kong mobster, a moment after Willy’s eyes opened. Only two years in age but fifty years of contrasting and tumultuous political activity separated them. Chen Boda had risen in the Chinese Communist Party in the same spectacular fashion Wo Lap Ling had risen in the Triad hierarchy. What made them brothers under the skin was that both reveled in the luxury of power in a way few can understand.

“I’m dying,” Wo Lap said softly in Mandarin, the chosen language of the Chinese Communist Party. “That will certainly make this year eventful for me.”

“How you arrive and how you exit are the only two things in life that count,” the old politician said, a smile playing at the corner of his thin lips. Both men knew this particular Confucian philosophy was inaccurate, if not ridiculous, at least for them. They had both been defined by the ruthless acts they’d committed in between those two sacred events.

“You have come here to give me the Master’s wisdom?” Willy Wo Lap said, his voice weakening to a whisper in the already quiet hospital room.

“It has been a year of *jing-shen-wu-ran*,” the Chinese politician said, talking of the spiritual pollution of China that the Communist government claimed was the sole fault of American intervention in Beijing’s internal policies.

“I am not a politician,” Willy Wo Lap said softly.

“This is not so. You are just a politician with different goals. You steal from America, you attack them from the inside. You can become a different kind of warrior in this battle. This is what I want to talk to you about.”

The two men looked at one another in the dimly lit room. Each waited for the other to speak. Finally, it was Chen Boda who continued:

“The Americans challenge us at every turn. They attempt to be the sole force in the Pacific theater. This year, they sent their aircraft carrier *Kitty Hawk* into the Yellow Sea to threaten us over our attempt to repatriate our renegade province, Taiwan. This is a direct threat against our national sovereignty. . . . They attempt to chastise us over our necessary reorganization of Tibet, tying that important internal matter to their Most Favored Nation trade status; complaining about our supposed Human Rights atrocities, while they burn their own citizens at Waco and castrate Black children in Alabama.”

Willy Wo Lap closed his eyes, both from fatigue and lack of interest. He had never cared about these things.

“I am boring you, comrade?” Chen Boda asked.

“The lowly swallow cannot possibly understand the lofty am-

bitions of the eagle,” Willy Wo Lap said, using another Confucian wisdom, then watched as the smile reappeared momentarily on the politician’s face.

“Let me propose to you a bargain,” the five-foot-tall head of the powerful Chinese Communist Military Commission said. “I will give you the kidneys you desperately need, but you in turn will work for me. . . . I want your river of pollution to become a flood. We will attack their society from the inside with even more narcotics, Russian AK-47s and illegal Chinese aliens who will steal from their welfare state. I will direct your efforts. You will increase and control the flow. You will continue to buy favor with American politicians. Increase your already sizable Guan-Xi. If you are caught, it will be you—not the People’s Republic of China—who will be guilty of this act of aggression. In return, I will give you life.”

The two men looked at one another. There seemed to be nothing else to say. It was a great deal for both of them.

They took him by ambulance past the gates of the Forbidden City. The gold tiles on the roofs of this ancient part of Beijing shone up defiantly at a three-quarter moon. They left the city on the Qianmen Dajie highway and finally arrived at a huge *lao gai*, or “reform through labor” camp. It was located in the Chinese countryside south of the capital. The camp was a mammoth, windowless fortress of gray concrete. Dismal, even from the outside. The *lao gai* housed prisoners who had been arrested for political crimes. There was a hospital there for medical experiments. The *lao gai* was full of the very men and women that President Bill Clinton was claiming were victims of Chinese Human Rights violations.

Chen Boda walked to the operating room on the sixth floor, where three of China’s best urological transplant surgeons had been rushed and were now awaiting him. It was four-fifteen in the morning.

“Is the donor here?” Chen Boda asked.

The doctor nodded and led the diminutive politician to an adjacent room where they looked through a window at a young student dissident strapped to a table. He looked back at them through the glass in wide-eyed fear.

The student was named Wan Jen Lam. He had been arrested for distributing brochures proclaiming the New Democratic Front in Tiananmen Square during the uprising five years before. He had been held under "strict supervision" for his crime without ever being formally charged, let alone facing trial.

"He's a five-out-of-six tissue type match to Mr. Wo Lap. A good donor," the lead surgeon said.

"Are you ready to begin?" Chen Boda asked the doctors, and they all nodded.

"Then wheel the patient in here so he can witness our generosity on his behalf."

A few minutes later, Wo Lap Ling was on a rolling hospital bed that was parked in front of the observation window where Wan Jen Lam was strapped down. They cranked Willy's bed up. Once the ailing Triad leader was in a position to see, Chen Boda went into the operating theater and nodded to one of the doctors. The surgeon, a narrow-faced man whose eyes were hidden behind the gleaming circles of his thick glasses, stepped forward and picked up a scalpel from a tray of instruments. He approached the frightened student, who wriggled helplessly under his restraints.

"You have a great love for American Democracy. It appears you think the Western moon is rounder than the Chinese moon," Chen Boda said without preamble. "But it is time for you to make a contribution to the Motherland."

"What are you going to do?" the terrified student asked.

"I am going to give you a chance to give valuable aid to your beloved country," Chen Boda said, smiling at the terrified youth. His smile was surprisingly warm and gentle, his voice soothing. Despite the horrifying situation, it seemed to calm Wan Jen Lam.

"How will I contribute?" the young man finally asked.

“You will give to the Motherland something she desperately needs. . . .”

The student was puzzled by this and furrowed his brow. Chen Boda motioned to the doctor, who advanced to the table, holding the scalpel as if it were a calligraphy brush: two fingers high on the outside of the handle, thumb in powerful opposition, lower two fingers resting on the inside of the handle near the blade. It was a grip that permitted extraordinary strength and precision.

The blade flashed as he swung it down and buried it in the student’s heart. The student convulsed once, exhaling a gust of air. Chen Boda watched impassively as the dissident quivered and shook; the scalpel protruding from his chest twitched like a small dark arrow as his nerves and synapses rioted within his skinny, undernourished body. Quickly and painfully, the young man died. Blood from the wound ran off the table and pooled on the floor. Then Chen Boda walked back into the adjoining room and faced Willy.

“I have done this for you, Wo Lap Ling. Do not forget that when you were about to perish, a good friend shielded you from the storm.” Then he turned and walked out of the room.

As the sun came up on Tiananmen Square, the three-man surgical team was already deep into it, removing Willy Wo Lap’s disease-shriveled kidneys and replacing them with Wan Jen Lam’s healthy ones.

Willy Wo Lap was wheeled into recovery at nine-thirty-five A.M. His vital signs were stable and he was about to begin a long journey of healing that would lead him back to power.

Wan Jen Lam was wheeled to an elimination chamber and disposed of quickly and efficiently. His body was shredded and washed with harsh acid. Once liquefied, it was drained away without a trace.

If Bill Clinton wanted examples of Human Rights violations, Chen Boda was only too happy to oblige.

Willy Wo Lap slept a peaceful sleep and dreamed of his father. The old fish-factory worker had once sat in their crowded



Kowloon apartment, with the sound of crying babies and electric saws ripping pig carcasses nearby, and told him, "No feast lasts forever." Willy had been ten and listened while his ailing father spouted Confucian wisdom dictated by Chairman Mao. These last painful years had proven Confucius and the old fish factory worker right. Willy had suffered renal failure . . . and with it had come a loss of all his appetites. The feast that was his life had ended. He no longer craved women, food, or luxury. All he wanted was a few moments free of pain. Now he had been given a new chance. Once more, the crafty Chinese mobster had managed to stay on the vicious tiger. Once more, he could savage his enemies from a seat of power behind the beast's shoulder blades. Willy was back.

A new feast was about to begin.