

5 June 1989
Beijing, China

A young man watched a column of tanks rumble down Chang'an Avenue towards Tiananmen Square. It was the day after the crackdown on student protesters and the sound of automatic gunfire had died away. The road was deserted except for a burned-out factory bus – and the tanks, with their distinct sound of heavy engines and the clank of metal tracks. The Chinese Type 59 tanks, pride of the People's Liberation Army, trundled along the broad avenue in single file as if they were participating in a military parade but there were no flag-waving spectators to line the streets.

The young man stepped out from the shadows and walked up the avenue towards the cavalcade. He wore a dark pair of trousers and white shirt and carried a shopping bag. He was a tiny figure compared to the iron behemoths. The cannon on the first tank was trained directly on him as they advanced towards each other. A red star emblem dazzled against the camouflage paint.

The stranger stopped directly in the path of the first tank.

It looked as if the tank would run the man over. He did not baulk or move. At the last possible moment, the tanks came to

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a halt, one behind the other, just a few short yards away from him.

The lead tank turned sharply in an attempt to go around the man. He stepped directly into its path again.

The armoured vehicle tried the same manoeuvre a second time, and then a third, but each time the man moved so that he was once more in its path.

The tank commanders switched off their engines and silence fell.

The man climbed on to the hull of the first tank, hauling himself up using the cannon. He clambered over the gun turret and called to the crew inside. He had a brief conversation with the gunner and then jumped down. A commander appeared at the hatch, watched the young man take up his position in the path of the tanks and then disappeared back inside the belly of the beast.

The roar of engines broke the silence. The tanks inched towards the flesh and blood obstacle. The protester remained in their way, the exact opposite of an immovable object but determined to face down the tanks.

Suddenly, two men appeared out of a side alley and hurried to the protester. They each grabbed an arm. He struggled and then gave up the fight. They dragged him away and, in a moment, he was gone, disappeared, as if he was never there.

A foreign reporter taped the scene from his hotel window overlooking the road. The 8mm reels, smuggled out of China, were the only proof of the Tank Man's lonely resistance.

ONE

Jack Ford woke up and flinched as the shafts of morning light stabbed right through his pupils. He felt like that old Greek guy – what was his name? – who’d put out both his eyes because he didn’t want to witness the consequences of his own deeds.

‘Oedipus,’ he muttered, rolling his legs off the sofa. He propped himself up with an elbow until he was halfway sitting up. ‘Oedipus Rex.’

He shut his eyes against the glare and found himself back in the desert; Afghan red dust clogging his nostrils, the sun so bright it was like a weapon in the hands of the Taliban. He remembered young Private Whiteside sitting next to him in the armoured personnel carrier, hands clasped together, praying for deliverance from IEDs. Events after that were tattooed into his brain.

The explosion.

Being flung from the vehicle.

Complete silence. Blood trickling from his ears.

Screaming for help.

Puffs of dust from incoming fire.

Holding Whiteside down and tying tourniquets to stop the blood.

Jack took deep slow breaths until the visions receded and he was back in the present. He looked around and established that he was in his tiny Brooklyn apartment, in his own clothes,

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surrounded by empty bottles from the previous evening. What had he been trying to forget?

The letter.

The letter was still there, on the cigarette-scarred coffee table, tugging at the corner of his vision, like a migraine or a memory or a sniper's scope catching the light.

He reached for the nearest bottle, tipped it back, gulped and then spat the mouthful all over the front of his shirt. Shit tasted weird. He held the bottle up to the light, squinting and grimacing. Ashes. *Ashes*. He'd used the bottle as an ashtray. Way to go, war hero.

Jack wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and then rubbed his eyes with his palms. As recently as the previous afternoon he'd intended, he'd absolutely intended, to get on with the rest of his life as best he could, to look at the past only when he had no choice and then only through the bottom of a shot glass.

Until the letter.

It arrived in the post – which in itself was a surprise. When was the last time he'd received any mail other than an advert for real estate or a flyer for fast food? Usually, Jack gathered up the mail and chucked it in the trash. Anything that wasn't junk was likely to be a bill – he got around to paying those when they sent a collection agent to wait on his doorstep. But the previous evening, protruding out of the assortment of crap, he'd noticed the letter. A real letter with those airmail marks on the envelope, a hand-printed address and a rectangle of Chinese stamps.

It was one of those moments which had fate written all over

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it, like when Sergeant Price stopped to pat the dog and got his head blown off in Fallujah.

Or when he'd been a young man in Beijing and met Xia for the first time.

She had smiled and asked him, 'Are you an American spy?'

He should have chucked the damned letter in the trash. He wasn't looking for trouble. Thirty years was so long ago that when he cast his mind back, it was like peering into the wrong end of a telescope. The images at the end were still as sharp as broken glass but so, so far away.

Instead, Jack opened the letter. He didn't hesitate or try and talk himself out of it. If you know you're going to end up doing something, you might as well do it right away.

It was from Xia.

I need your help, she'd written. *There is no one else I can trust.*

And her plea brought the past right up smack into the present; into this stinking apartment, so that it was sitting on the couch next to him like an old friend, asking why he hadn't kept in touch, where he'd been all this time.

He'd been to a lot of different places. Kosovo. Afghanistan. Iraq. But none of them, it would seem, quite far enough away.

Jack reached out, picked up the envelope again, and the photo slipped out. He stared at the studio headshot, close up, smiling. So very beautiful. He turned it over and there was an address on the back: Faculty of Law, University of Peking.

Suddenly, he was back in Beijing in 1989, around the corner from Tiananmen Square, crouched in the shadows along Chang'an Avenue. He could smell the petrol fumes and gunpowder. Xia and Peter were huddled next to him. Sweat

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stung his eyes and he clutched her hand, looking for courage.
Cowards die many times before their deaths.

‘We have to do something,’ he said, his voice an urgent whisper. ‘We have to save him.’

The man jumped in front of the lead tank for the third time.

Xia raised her head slightly to get a better view, peering over a temporary road divider. ‘What the hell is he trying to do? He’s playing chicken with a tank!’

‘There’s nothing we can do,’ Peter said. He gripped Jack’s arm. ‘He’s a dead man.’

The valiant never taste of death but once.

Jack Ford dragged himself back to the present with an effort that felt like pushing rocks uphill. He stared at the photo of the beautiful young woman again. *Please help her*, Xia had written. *If you won’t help me, please help our daughter.*

Our daughter.

Her name is Fei Yen.

Jack reached for a vodka bottle and then hesitated. He looked at the photo again. A photo of the woman that Xia claimed was his daughter.

What’s past is prologue.

He took a deep, slow breath and then shoved papers and bottles off the coffee table until he unearthed his phone. The past was calling. Maybe it was time he picked up.

‘**SOON YOU WILL ACHIEVE** your dreams.’ Yu Yan was in bed next to her husband, soon to be the most powerful man in China.

Zhu Juntao smiled. ‘I could not have done it without you.’

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He was in a generous mood because he too could sense that his time was at hand. He lay back against the heavy brocade bedding with the dragon motif, folded his hands under his head and stared at the ornate carved ceiling with the brass chandeliers. Even though he had not yet officially taken up his position as the General Secretary of the Communist Party (and, by implication, the next President of the People's Republic of China), his residence was fit for an emperor. He remembered the distant past when he had been a young man and an avowed communist, despising luxury as the corruption of capitalist running dogs. He would never have guessed that Party leaders lived in such opulence, and he wouldn't have approved if he had known. But times changed. People changed. It was necessary to have the trappings of power, both as a reward for the hard scramble to the top and to impress the citizens.

'Of course you couldn't have done it without me,' she said. 'It is as Mao said, women hold up half the sky.'

'Don't you go around quoting Mao. That man was a lunatic. His Great Leap Forward almost caused China to leap right back to the Stone Age.'

'The walls have ears,' she cautioned.

'You expect the General Secretary-designate of the Communist Party of China to be afraid?' He enjoyed rolling his new title around his mouth.

'I expect him to be careful, that is all.' She sat up on the bed and leaned her head against his shoulder. 'You have many enemies. The Politburo will fight your reforms every step of the way.'

He smiled but there was no humour in it. 'There are some who will support me.'

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‘Few speak truth to power.’

Her husband laughed. ‘Some day, my dear, they will have your sayings in a Little Red Book!’

‘And you will have your image in Tiananmen Square instead of . . .’ She stopped, unable to finish the sentence. Chairman Mao, displayed in mummified splendour within his mausoleum on Tiananmen Square, haunted his successors like Hamlet’s ghost.

‘What are you looking forward to the most?’ Juntao asked, keen to change the subject away from Mao. He turned over in the bed and sat up, reaching for his trousers. He was a tall, angular man who looked like a law professor.

‘I hope the Americans give us a state dinner,’ she said as she got out of bed and began to dress. ‘I would enjoy that.’

‘Consider it done. I will send word that my first diplomatic engagement upon being confirmed as Premier will be to make a state visit to Washington, DC.’

He leaned back on a pillow and imagined the President of the United States waiting for him at the end of a red carpet, the image beamed around the world. He hoped the buffoon they had elected wouldn’t embarrass him with one of those power handshakes that became a tug of war.

His wife tried with moderate success to zip up her silk *qípáo*. He stood and assisted her, gazing at their reflections in the long mirror. She barely came up to his shoulder. Her face had fine lines but her body was slim and youthful. The mandarin collar and pearl buttons suited her delicate features. Her hair was cut in an old-fashioned bob that framed her face. Yu Yan would be an asset by his side. He would demand and she would charm. How could they fail?

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‘You must wear a red *qipáo* that shows off your legs when we meet the President of the United States,’ he insisted, smiling. ‘Or maybe not. That old lecher might grab you . . . and then I would have to start a war to avenge your honour.’

‘I will have difficulty keeping him at a distance, but for the sake of world peace I will do so, my husband.’

Yu Yan sat down on the edge of the bed, knees together, back straight, and adopted a serious tone, all business now. ‘Will the Politburo be happy if you go to America so early in your term?’

Juntao frowned and adjusted his spectacles, a nervous tic when he didn’t like the way a conversation was going. ‘You are right – they will want me to wander around the industrial belt admiring high-speed trains and factories. They are all backward isolationists.’

‘Do not say such things to anyone except me,’ she said. ‘Someone like General Zhang would probably have you arrested for treason.’

‘Zhang? He’s nothing but a thug.’

‘A powerful thug who has the loyalty of the People’s Liberation Army,’ she warned. ‘You would be wise to see him as a threat. That is the way he sees you.’

‘The PLA is supposed to be loyal to the Party and its leadership – that’s me.’

‘Don’t be naive, Juntao. General Zhang made his way up through the ranks. He commands personal loyalty amongst the uniformed men.’

‘That is why I need the people on my side,’ he said.

‘They do support you.’

Juntao walked to the window and shifted the heavy gold

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brocade curtain so he could look across the lakes that surrounded the Zhongnanhai complex, official residence and workplace of Chinese leaders. He smoothed down his hair with both hands and braced his shoulders.

‘How do we know what the people want?’ he asked. ‘We never ask them for their opinion. We don’t give them a vote. We just sit around in small rooms filled with cigar smoke and tell them afterwards who their next leader will be. And then we provide school children with flags so they can cheer our procession as we ride to power.’

‘Sometimes we don’t ask the question because we might not like the answer.’

‘That is precisely why I waited so long to ask you to marry me,’ said Juntao, turning away from the window and reaching for his wife. She allowed him to hold her for a moment and then stepped away and looked at him, not trying to disguise her worry.

‘You plan to go ahead?’ she asked.

‘Of course! If I do nothing, I will go down in history as the Premier who presided over the disintegration of China.’

‘Is the situation really that bad?’

‘Worse. There is unrest and unhappiness everywhere. The people want change and they grow impatient at the snail’s pace of reform.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Find a hero,’ he said. ‘In her hour of need, China needs a hero.’

THE PRESIDENT OF THE United States of America crushed the empty can of Diet Coke and tossed it towards the bin. He missed.

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A few other misshapen cans on the carpet suggested both that POTUS enjoyed his Diet Coke and that his aim was rarely true. He made no attempt to clear the mess. The man at the global apex of power did not stoop to such things.

POTUS looked around his Oval Office and tried to feel cheerful – nice digs when you considered it, although he personally preferred a more opulent style. But truth be told, the job was getting him down. He levered himself to his feet with the help of the *Resolute* desk, carved from the timbers of the ship *Resolute* and presented as a gift to President Hayes by Queen Victoria, and walked over to the big mirror hanging on the wall. Gilt-edged and antique, it had either belonged to one of the earlier presidents or been a gift from some foreign head of state trying to curry favour with the incumbent of the time. The President admired his reflection – the patrician nose, the wide shoulders, the carefully combed-over hair. He pulled the edges of his jacket together to try and disguise the paunch but fine tailoring could only do so much. The stomach and the watery blue irises, faded against the bloodshot whites, gave the game away. He was out of his depth.

There was a discreet knock on the door and it was pushed open by his secretary, Mrs Hibbert, built like a World War Two tank and with similar firepower. He was terrified of her. ‘Mr Griffin and General Rodriguez are here to see you, sir.’

The President glanced at the diary on his desk, open to that day’s page, and stifled a sigh. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘For my security briefing. Send them in.’

Joseph Griffin, the National Security Adviser – unkempt, with a moustache like an untrimmed hedge, spectacles so thick they

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looked like magnifying glasses and a spotted bow tie that verged on the ridiculous – walked in and they shook hands briefly even though they saw each other almost every other day. Secretary of Defense General Rodriguez followed and saluted smartly. The leader of the free world smiled. He liked that; the formality of the military always pleased him.

‘What’s happening in the big bad world?’ POTUS asked, reaching into his desk and retrieving another Diet Coke.

‘The North Koreans have threatened to resume nuclear testing, sir.’ Griffin’s tone was matter-of-fact.

‘Nasty little Rocket Man. I thought he and I had a deal,’ said the President of the United States.

‘Yes, sir, but the North Koreans are notoriously unreliable.’ General Alberto Rodriguez was in his uniform and looked the part of the old war horse that he was. His grave bearing and impeccable manners always suggested generations of breeding; no one would have guessed that he was the son of a single mother who cleaned hotel rooms to put him through school.

‘Yes, but we made a *deal!*’ insisted POTUS.

‘Yes, sir,’ the other men said, almost in unison.

‘What can we do? Give me some options. I can’t look weak.’

‘I’ve just debriefed Dominic Corke at the CIA, sir,’ replied Rodriguez.

‘And?’

‘We still have time. According to his intel – which he rates as being of high quality – the North Koreans do not have an ICBM that can reach the continental United States.’

‘How long do we have before they acquire the technology?’ asked Griffin.

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‘Difficult to put a precise time frame on it but the estimate from the CIA is one to two years, especially if we toughen sanctions.’

‘Doesn’t mean they can’t threaten our allies,’ growled Griffin. ‘What about Japan and South Korea?’

‘They remain at risk,’ agreed Rodriguez, ‘but that was the case even with North Korea’s conventional weapons.’

‘It looks bad if North Korea gets the long range nukes. We don’t want them to have any nukes that can hit us,’ said POTUS.

He felt that Griffin and Rodriguez were making a huge effort not to glance at each other. The President hated it when these hawks in his administration treated him like an idiot.

‘We need leverage against China so they cooperate with us to contain North Korea,’ said Griffin.

‘What about the trade war?’ asked POTUS.

‘It is possible that the Chinese see that as leverage over *us*,’ said Rodriguez.

The President glared at him but could not read from his stern face whether sarcasm had been intended.

‘So how do we do that? How do we pressure China?’

‘Send a few warships through the Taiwan Strait; supply the Taiwanese with some weapons technology that they can point at the Chinese mainland,’ said Griffin, brushing down his moustache over his upper lip.

‘We should just kill him.’ The two subordinates stared at the President. He said, ‘You know, Kim Jong-Un. We should send in a team. Like a SEAL team. Like Obama did with bin Laden.’ The President’s face turned red and made a sharp contrast to

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his straw-coloured hair. 'I could do a news conference and announce it.'

'US policy is not to assassinate the heads of state of other nations,' explained General Rodriguez, face impassive.

'I decide on the policy, right?'

'Yes, Mr President, but an assassination would risk destabilizing North Korea – we have no idea who would take over – and render the potential for first strike by them even more likely,' replied the general.

'I thought you just said they couldn't reach us!'

'Our allies, sir.'

'Allies in harm's way are an expensive nuisance,' complained POTUS. 'Why did we promise to provide military protection, anyway?'

When neither man responded he said, 'So we have to show the Chinese we mean business?'

'I believe we have time to explore a relationship with the new Chinese leader, General Secretary-elect Juntao.' Rodriguez did not make eye contact with the National Security Adviser as he contradicted his position.

'That tall guy with the great-looking wife?'

'Yes, Mr President, our information is that he might be willing to come to the table to do a deal. He will rein in North Korea in exchange for an end to tariffs.'

'He wants a deal?'

'That is what we have been led to understand, sir.'

'How do we know this guy will keep the deal? The North Koreans didn't! I can't look like a fool again.'

'My suggestion is that we send a few ships to convince them

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we mean business, and offer Taiwan missile defence tech. We can do this *while* responding to the overtures from the new kid on the block,' said Griffin. 'It was your tariffs, after all, that brought them to the table.'

POTUS beamed. 'America First,' he said. 'If the tariffs brought them to the table, then the warships will seal the deal. Send them.'

'Yes, sir,' barked Griffin. 'And the defence tech?'

'Sure, sure, whatever you think is best.' POTUS was bored now, and it showed as he hugged himself and stared at the ceiling like a sedated patient in a straitjacket.

'Shall we go over the rest of the security briefing, sir?' asked Rodriguez.

'Anything urgent?'

'No, sir.'

'Brief the VP then! What the hell is the use of having that dried-up stick on the show if she doesn't do anything?'

JACK WAS BUCKLED INTO the window seat of a Boeing 777 on his way from JFK to Beijing, via Singapore. He was trapped in there by an American couple from the Midwest. They smiled at him and he smiled back. Jack knew they were affable because he looked so ordinary. Slightly below average height, about five ten, eighty kilos, the cords of muscle and the tracks of bullets both hidden under a loose T-shirt and windbreaker. His nose had a kink in it – but not so much as to say 'fighter'. More like that guy who walked into a door once after a few drinks too many at the office party.

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A few drinks too many. That part was usually true.

‘We’re going to see our brand-new granddaughter in Singapore. How about you?’ asked the woman in the next seat.

He was on his way to meet Peter Kennedy, former colleague. In a sense, there was a symmetry to this plan: if Xia was back in his life, then it made sense that Peter would have a role to play too. History was repeating itself. This was not, however, information he planned to share with these gregarious strangers.

When he didn’t respond, they settled for colonizing the arm-rests. Jack shut his eyes, knowing that he needed sleep, knowing that the memories would keep him awake. It had been that way since he received the letter with the photograph of his daughter; the spitting image of Xia with maybe, just maybe, a little bit of him around her eyes and chin. Or was that just wishful thinking?

Jack had spent his days looking for information and drawing blanks. On the seventh day he called Peter and asked for assistance, even though each word caught in his throat like a fish hook.

And now, after thirty years during which they’d each done their best to pretend that the other didn’t exist, Jack was on his way to meet Peter again. In Singapore.

Raking up the past was an all or nothing deal.

They’d met for the first time at the US Embassy in Beijing where both were playing at being spies. Jack had been recruited from Georgetown when he finished his degree in English Literature; Peter Kennedy was from NYU. In their blue jeans and baseball caps they were young enough, cool enough, American enough to save the world from communism. Or so

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Jack had thought anyway. Peter didn't seem to care much either way.

The CIA station chief in Beijing arranged a 'chance' meeting with one of the student leaders, Xia.

'What do we do? What's our mission?' asked Jack.

The man laughed out loud. 'Nothing. You don't have to do anything. Make some friends. Keep your ears to the ground.'

Xia, the student leader, had been waiting for Jack at the South Entrance of the Temple of Heaven. Her slim figure was silhouetted against the carved wooden circular exterior of the building. The sun behind her head created a halo. *Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?*

'I'm Jack,' he said.

Xia smiled, revealing even white teeth and a dimple that hinted at mischief. 'Are you an American spy?'

Her English was flawless and he remembered his brief: that the rebellious students were the children of the well-heeled city dwellers.

'I'm an American student,' he answered.

'What do you study?'

'Postgraduate journalism,' he answered. 'I'm in Beijing doing an internship but I thought I could write you up for my college newspaper – generate some sympathy for your cause back home in the States.'

'We would appreciate the support of our Western counterparts in the struggle for the liberty of the Chinese people,' she said solemnly.

Every statement of Xia's sounded like a slogan of the intended revolution. Later, Jack realized it was the way she had been

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taught to express political thought. The only problem for the Chinese authorities was that the students were quoting from Plato and Lincoln instead of Mao's Little Red Book.

'What are you hoping to achieve?' Jack asked.

'A government of the people, by the people, for the people,' she replied.

Peter, always the sceptic, said, 'Let us know what that's like when you get it.'

Within a few weeks, Xia and others had organized more than three thousand students from Peking University and Tsinghua University to set up camp in Tiananmen Square. Jack reported everything back to the embassy, was commended for his efforts, resented Peter when he tagged along and fell deeply in love with the youthful Chinese rebel.

'They will have no choice but to agree to our demands for greater freedom and democracy,' she said to him, bright-eyed, one day, clutching a flyer that had recently been distributed on the streets. It listed seven demands, including a free press and democracy, that had been cobbled together by the students.

There was a quote in the flyer from Jack: *The students of China may rely on the solidarity of their American counterparts – Jack Ford, American student activist.*

'No one in America sounds like that,' Jack said.

'No one in China knows that,' she replied.

Jack realized that Xia was aware of the value of propaganda. He admired her for it.

'The press is urging a hard line . . . and we all know what that means,' he warned, taking her hand in one of his. For once he'd been able to ditch Peter, so he was keen to make some real

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progress with the girl. She drew back but smiled at him to lessen the rejection.

‘You’re right,’ she said. ‘They are laying the groundwork for violence to disperse the protesters.’

‘You have to stop! You’re in danger.’

Her face grew hard.

‘The numbers in Tiananmen are swelling,’ he continued, as if she didn’t know.

They’d been there earlier in the day. The atmosphere had been festive – the drums, the shared food, the colourful bandanas and the young Chinese men in their fake lumberjack shirts and bad haircuts flocking around Xia like bees around a honey pot.

‘Do those kids realize the risk they’re taking?’ he asked.

‘Sacrifices must be made,’ she said. ‘Did not your Thomas Jefferson say that the tree of liberty must be watered with the blood of patriots and tyrants?’

‘You sound like you’re hoping for bloodshed!’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

He must not have looked convinced because she reached for his hand and said, ‘Come – let us go back to my place and prepare more flyers for the revolution!’

Jack hesitated for a second, still doubtful. And then she smiled at him and he was lost again.

Dragging himself back to the present, Jack leaned his forehead against the Boeing 777 aircraft window and slipped his hand into his jacket pocket. He felt the rustle of thin paper and the harder edge of the photograph. How different things might have been if he hadn’t gone home with Xia that day to her tiny room in a maze within the old city. His lids flickered and he opened his

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eyes wearily. An air hostess pounced immediately. 'Sir, will you put your seat in the upright position and secure your tray table? We will be landing in Singapore shortly.'

When he fled Beijing after the Tiananmen Square massacre thirty years earlier, he'd stopped in Singapore. Jack looked out the window and took in the skyscrapers along the water's edge, their radio antennae lost in low clouds, the hundreds of ships anchored offshore and lined up with the tide, the golf courses dotted with sand traps on the approach to Changi Airport. Times changed. Places changed.

Did people change? That was what Jack wanted to know, needed to know. The plane touched down and taxied to the terminal. Jack unfastened his seatbelt, grabbed his bag from the overhead locker and checked for his passport. History was repeating itself. But he needed a different ending this time around.