

SECOND SKIN



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PROLOGUE

VOID. DARK, SILENT, LIMITLESS. Stillness. Eternal waiting. Stillness expanding, growing into movement. Shapes shifting. Needle hole in darkness. Silence seeping into sound. Gray waves flowing, receding.

In the midst of his predawn meditation, Wang An Yueh felt a prodding at the edge of the Void. He noted it briefly and let it go. It returned, more insistent this time. Pushing, nudging his mind, a force growing stronger, inexorable, pushing him like a river rising to flood level. Only profound control enabled him to maintain calm. His heart rate and respiration slowed to near hibernation levels.

In that state of control, he slipped out of the Void and recognized the current for what it was: his own mortality surging, carrying him to the edge, the endless drop back to the beginning. His time in this vessel was drawing to a close. Certainly, his age was a signal. But it was not uncommon for masters trained in the internal martial arts to live well beyond a normal human life span. He had passed the hundred-year mark earlier in the year still able to mobilize his qi easily.

But in the last two months, a strange fatigue had set in, a spiritual lassitude. He could still compensate, and when he balanced his qi, his vitality returned. But the nagging reminder was becoming insistent, lurking at the edges of his awareness. He had tried different herbs in combination with healing qi-gong, as his master had taught him long ago, and they had helped ease the feeling. But each time it returned. And it was growing stronger.

Wang An Yueh knew it was more than just a trick his ego might play to test him. He allowed himself to accept the certainty that the time of the great transition was approaching. In many ways he welcomed it. He had led a rich and fulfilling life, taking his lineage's version of taiji to greater heights than

his master before him in an age when many lines of internal arts were dying away. One more major task lay ahead: He must impart his knowledge to a successor. With that understanding came a sense of peace and clarity.

In the east, on the other side of the mountains that sheltered his village, light was beginning to replace darkness. In the small garden outside his home, the soft wing brush of birds arising signaled the coming dawn. Wang sighed, touched by the poignancy of the daily cycle and, somewhere deeper, by the echoes of a larger cycle.

His life had been a search for balance and harmony. He had sought softness to discover the power within it, and his quest to become a warrior had led to the discovery that fighting skills were empty without healing skills. Now it was necessary to seek the death within a life, the second skin we all wore.

The prospect of death held no fear for him. Indeed, it was as he taught, and had been taught: The fully conscious and aware human chooses voluntarily when to draw qi from the universe and when to return it. The journey from this life to the next was not to be feared but welcomed.

He questioned why he felt as though he was carrying the weight of Wu Tan Mountain. Perhaps he feared that unless he could find someone willing to share the burden, his art—the art of the masters before him—would die. He told himself that it was his pride talking because in the vastness of the Tao, it should not matter that one art, one bloodline, should die out. *If I search for a legacy, then I must also be searching for my death.*

In the core of his being, Wang felt one with moving water. He knew that affinity was the source of his *Neijia* ability, but it was sometimes a cruel relationship, where the only constant was change. Endless change. It needed to be balanced with stillness, and that had been his lifelong challenge.

He smiled outwardly this time, savoring the irony. Here he was, supposedly in that state of stillness, yet his mind was coursing through the streambeds of time and space in a race to the vast future that contained all things.

He took three deep cleansing breaths, thanking the Tao for the miracle of this day and of his life. Then he opened his eyes and gracefully, fluidly, rose from the ground and began his exercises.

He knew that the search might take some time. It was important that he stay fit for the task.



I COULD HEAR THE DAMN PHONE RINGING as I shrugged the overweight dry bag off my shoulder. It hit the floor with a weary thud just as the mudroom door slapped shut behind me. The noise triggered a deep warning bark from Rourke, our twelve-year-old chocolate Lab. A single bark, then his nose told him it was me. As I stepped into the house and switched on the light, I heard him struggle off his bed in the living room. Not giving in to arthritic hips yet, he padded over to me in a slow limp, nails clicking on the wood floor like hail hitting a metal roof.

As he wagged me a welcome, I crouched and scratched his stocky chest. He rewarded me with a toothy grin and a lick on my forearm.

“How’s the pooch?”

He wagged some more as I scratched him, then smiled and headed back to bed.

I headed for the shower. I needed it long, slow, and just hot enough that I could stay in it for as long as I wanted. Then sleep—however much I could get.

When I get home from the Big Ditch, I’m dirty, tired, and still on river time. I need gradual reentry, time to recompress. Sleep is the reset button. Sometimes I get that luxury; sometimes I don’t. Civilization can be pretty intrusive.

A few times a year, I guide raft trips on the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon. No way to make a living, maybe, but priceless on the adventure scale. I love the simple physicality of it. It’s hard labor that seems to somehow get easier the

longer you're on the river. I need that kind of exertion, which probably comes from growing up a farm boy. You don't feel like you've accomplished anything unless you're worn out.

But there are parts of guiding that can wear you out in ways that aren't physical.

This last trip, four guides on eighteen-foot rafts took sixteen paying customers down the river. The tourists included two nice young couples from Nebraska, two Wall Street investment bankers and their wives, three doctors—one with a husband, one with a wife, the third with a girlfriend—and an LA couple whose second choice for couples therapy was a Grand Canyon trip. First choice was two weeks in the south of France, but hubbie's legal problems had him on a short leash.

The folks from Nebraska were great. Pulled their own weight and then some. Outgoing, happy to be there, often awestruck by the beauty and majesty of the canyon. It was their third time down, and they still glowed with a freshman wonder.

The doctors and their partners were fit, fun, energetic, and quick studies of river ways. They tended to stick together and maybe isolate themselves a bit. Pretty typical on commercial trips, and I didn't hold it against them. The LA couple and the investment banking group were personality stink bombs. They expected cocktails daily at 3:00 p.m. and valet tent service. You could tell the whole groover thing—that's what we call the portable toilets we carry—was highly distasteful for them. One investment banker's wife didn't poop for three days. Leah, my top guide, filled me in, although the suffering woman's pinched expression was a pretty clear sign of her discomfort. Leah eventually talked her down, so to speak. Once she came to terms with the whole out in the open thing, she relaxed and started smiling again. Still a bitch but far more tolerable.

You get to see that on the river sometimes, paring away the crust of noise we talk ourselves into being so important, easing into the down and dirty of a two-week wilderness river trip. I could be reading too much into it. Maybe she just liked the view when she pooped.

The LA couple never did figure it out. They bossed around the guides like personal majordomos, quickly earning them the silent treatment and slow service. They tended to stay up late arguing, disturbing the peace of camp. During the day, they switched over to bitching and moaning. The water was too cold. The air was too warm. It was too hazy. The water was too high. The water wasn't high enough. They went to bed pissed off and woke up pissed off.

I made a stab at limiting the annoyance factor the third night by setting up their tent well away from the others. I made them a pet project. Apparently, I'm just stupid enough to take on a challenge like that. Plus, I saw no reason for the other guides to suffer. They never did get into the rhythm of the river, and it was obvious to everyone they were glad when the trip was over. Not as glad as the guides and the other tourists were.

The canyon and the river were, as always, enduring and ephemeral, beautiful and dangerous. It was a mostly memorable trip, asshole management aside. Still, I was glad to be home, apart from the fact that the damn landline was going off like a fire alarm. It's an anachronism in this age of wireless and personalized ringtones, and I'd like to let it go, but wireless reception is sketchy where we live.

I hesitated on the way to the shower and listened stupidly for a couple of seconds, trying to decide whether I should answer it. As I did, the ringing stopped, leaving an acoustic vacuum my brain filled with the sound of the river. Sometimes it makes sense to simply let things unfold. Or in this case, shut up.

The shower was perfect. So was the long, dreamless sleep. As for the phone call, ignoring it made no difference.



ROURKE AND I WOKE to a still, empty house. Allie, my wife, and Tripp, our youngest, were out of town looking at four-year colleges.

Coffee in hand and steel-cut oats bubbling on the stove, I clicked my smartphone into projection mode so that text and images flowed onto a four-foot by three-foot space on a bare patch of plaster wall. Three weeks in the canyon had adapted my eyes to outdoor far-vision mode. I wasn't quite ready for a big dose of the little screen.

The emails were mostly the usual collection of male erectile dysfunction cures and investment come-ons. My guard software vaporized one attached virus. There was also a message from Herbert Thorson.

“Mr. O'Malley: When I called yesterday, your house sitter said you'd be home last night. I called last night and no one answered. I trust you read your emails. Please contact me ASAP. I understand you have a talent for locating missing people. I need to locate my son.”

An electronic business card with his phone number was embedded in the email. Thorson, it seemed, was chairman-CEO of NanoGene. The name triggered a synapse, and a vague memory kicked in: Boulder biotech. Human genome mapping project, maybe some early stem cell research? Not sure.

In addition to the guiding gig, I do a little freelance writing, but my money job is finding people. For some reason, I seem to be good at it. It's one of the quirky things I picked up during my years of committing journalism.

Most of the time, the people I'm looking for are missing of their own volition. Typically, they're running away from something. It's a basic animal thing: fight or flight. The fighters generally take care of themselves. The fliers sometimes need help finding their way home—if coming home is what they want. Maybe they need to get away from something: the law, someone who wants to hurt them, an unhealthy relationship or memories of one. Sometimes they're fleeing responsibilities, the past, or an unbearable future. In a couple of special cases, I've helped my targets stay lost.

The search tools are pretty basic: social security numbers, credit card numbers and records, motor vehicle data, health-care history. Those tools work about 60 percent of the time. For people who really don't want to be found, it helps to think like they do. You try to paint a picture of the missing person by talking to family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and enemies. If you can get inside their head, you might be able to get a handle on not just what they've done but why and what they might do next. Sometimes all the tools and techniques are useless. Sometimes lost people are dead. Maybe it's better that way.

Guiding produces enough money to make it worthwhile, but it's not about the money. That's why I have this other life. And now, with one son a college junior and the other a freshman, I needed work.

Getting through to Herbert Thorson, the man himself, proved to be a challenge. His self-described administrative assistant seemed convinced I was either a terrorist or a scammer. I didn't blame her for being protective, but there was no need to be rude about it.

Ms. Tight Ass put me on hold to check his schedule, and I listened to some elevator electronica for a few minutes. When she returned, she was blunt. "Mr. Thorson's schedule is quite full right now."

"Look, miz AA, *he* called *me*. So I guess you have a choice. You can tell your boss that Gus O'Malley is returning his call and let him make the decision on whether he wants to talk to me. Or you can ponder how he'll react when he gets my email. In it, I'll explain why I think it's foolish to hire

flunkies who think they know better than the boss does. Think it over. Take your time. Knock yourself out.”

I could hear her suck in her breath. Back in the day, when I was a reporter in the muddy trenches of daily journalism, I'd dealt with her type regularly. It's not particularly a gender thing. The male guard dogs can be just as bad. My preferred method is play nice: sweet talk, sympathize, cajole. I usually got access.

This was different. I might need the work, but I didn't need bullshit.

The next person to come on the line was the boss man himself. He was quick to apologize. “Mr. O'Malley, don't be too hard on Inga. It's her job to vet calls, protect my privacy. You would not believe how many con artists there are trying to piggyback on the fortunes of a successful company. Inga's very good at screening them.”

I kept my tone neutral. “Sure. Sounds like business is good. Maybe you could take a little chunk of profits and send Inga to charm school. She could take a course in graceful rejection. Write it off as professional development.”

He paused, then chuckled. “Not a bad idea. Inga can be . . . zealous.”

He was being gracious. I went with it. “No harm, no foul. I got through. Why don't you fill me in on why you think your son is missing and not just taking some time off. Then we can talk about whether you need help finding him and if I'm the guy for the job.”

The pause was longer this time. He was contemplating just how to say it.

“It's been a month now. Thirty days exactly. My son wouldn't just take off without telling someone what he was doing. He wouldn't do that—I mean voluntarily. He's extremely conscientious and dedicated to his work. He wouldn't just drop out. He'll take over this company one day. Sooner rather than later. He knows it, and he's excited about it.”

The words tumbled out in a rush. I was listening to a man strongly in control of most things in his life who was ill at ease with things he couldn't control. Who wouldn't show some cracks facing the uncertainty of a lost child?

“Before I agree to help you—if I agree to help you—I need to ask a few questions. You may not like some of them much. Don’t take it personally. I’m sure you’re familiar with the term *due diligence*. This is part of my due diligence. If I can’t help, I’ll tell you. If we can play by those rules, great. If not, I can suggest some good private investigators.”

“You come very highly recommended, Mr. O’Malley . . . by some good private investigators. I want to find my son. Any question you can ask that will get us started on that, I’ll answer. Fire away.”

It would have been interesting to know who’d been doing the recommending, but that could wait. It was a small circle, anyhow.

“Have you ever abused your son, Mr. Thorson?”

There was a long moment of silence. When Thorson responded, it was in a tightly controlled tone. “You don’t hold back, do you? Okay. Whatever it takes. Like any father, I’ve been manipulative and controlling to a degree. When Clay—that’s short for Clayton—was small, I administered physical punishment a couple of times. Paddlings. His mother was pursuing a PhD, so she was gone a lot.

“Later, as Clay grew up, she wasn’t comfortable dealing with the tempestuousness of a teenager. I took on what you might call a buffering role. I think we bonded then, father and son. Not that he was ever a bad kid. Moody only occasionally. Rebellious very rarely. Always a top-notch student. Top-notch. When he was an adolescent, we had a few rows when he resisted his mother’s . . . guidance. By today’s standards, I was heavy-handed. I mean, I yelled at him. If that’s abuse, so be it. I wasn’t doing it for pleasure and took no pleasure from it.

“Clay and I and his mother talked about that part of his life once he was out of it. If he harbors resentment, he hides it awfully well.”

You never know what you’re going to get when you serve up a question like that. Responses range from instant defensiveness—a dead giveaway—to wrenching catharsis. Herb Thorson’s response came off as honest, thoughtful, and deliberate. Was that the same thing as truthful? Without seeing his body language, I couldn’t be sure. And even then, my bullshit detector is good but not infallible. Gave him a pass on the first test.

“I had to ask. You’re smart enough to understand why. Second question: Have you contacted the police?”

Immediate response. “No. NanoGene’s a public company, Mr. O’Malley. We have a responsibility to disclose material events. The death, illness, or extended absence of a principal would qualify. Clay is vice president and head of research. He’s also the scientific brains behind the company. We have a responsibility not to alarm shareholders or markets. Clay has ample vacation time to cover his absence. It’s the lack of contact that’s worrisome. I’ll contact the police and notify the SEC if necessary, once you’ve assessed the situation.”

If I’d been Dad, especially one with his influence, I would have called the cops and had a quiet, honest conversation. But I could see it through his eyes. Missing persons investigations are a low priority for most cop shops. Let it go for now.

“Fair enough. Why don’t you give me the backstory.”

He seemed to have been holding his breath. Maybe he’d been worrying about another shoe dropping. In any event, he let go with one long hiss.

He’d gone over it in his mind about a million times. He knew his son well and just felt something wasn’t quite right. Clay had always been a good student, sometimes maybe too good, tending to obsess about his studies and his work. A perfectionist who could get wound pretty tight. Early on, father had encouraged son to find some balance between work and . . . something else. A smart kid who worked hard, Clay was gifted athletically as well as intellectually, so physical activity became the antidote. He swam competitively in high school but was only marginally into the organized team thing. In college, he gravitated more toward the solitary outdoor sports: kayaking, rock climbing, skiing, mountain biking. Likes activities that require intelligence and analysis as well as strength and stamina. Likes testing his limits.

As an undergrad at Stanford and a grad student at Caltech, Clay earned a BS and master’s degree in biogenetics, a relatively new discipline combining nanotechnology, biology, and genetics. A Stanford PhD followed less than two years after the master’s degree.

He sounded like the kind of wonder boy who’d make any dad proud.

When I wondered out loud why Clay had picked biotech over the internet gold mine, Herb had a ready answer.

“His mother and I probably had a bit of influence there. I’m a Stanford grad myself, with an MBA from Harvard Business School. No scientific background whatsoever, unless you count the dismal science, economics. Marian, his mother, was a research biologist before we married. PhD in biology from MIT. She was working on her doctorate when we married and started NanoGene. Clay’s our only child. He comes by all the outdoor stuff honestly. He grew up skiing, hiking, biking, running rivers, and camping. Those were family affairs. During one of those campfire dreaming out loud sessions, I remember saying something like, wouldn’t it be great to work together someday, combine our talents, with him and his mother the scientific brainpower and me the business strategist?”

Father and son devised a plan for the company that tapped the potential of three emerging sciences: biology, nanotechnology, and genetics. The three sectors meshed nicely, and there was a ton of opportunity to develop bleeding edge, not to mention lucrative, solutions for medicine, manufacturing, and defense.

“Clay’s an intense but deliberate person. What he’s not is frivolous or irresponsible. One of his passions is building schools and hospitals in undeveloped countries and doing disaster relief. He’s a good man bent on doing good. When he commits, he totally commits.”

“This is helpful. It gives me a feel for your son. So tell me something else. What do *you* think happened?”

Another deep breath and release. “Clay has practiced martial arts for quite a while. Since grade school. Over the past few years, he’s latched onto something he calls the Chinese internal arts or something like that. It’s a part of his life we haven’t talked about much. He . . . compartmentalizes. What I do know is that every few months for a couple of years now he travels to a seminar somewhere in the US taught by some Chinese master.”

All this was interesting, but I was starting to think the kid had just gone AWOL. A month is a long time to wait to deliver a ransom note. And a thirty-something who takes off and doesn’t check in with Mom and Dad doesn’t necessarily constitute a crisis. He might just need a little breathing room.

“Did Clay ever talk about the people he met at these seminars? Maybe a friend or friends he made?”

“I’ll check with Marian, but nothing sticks in my mind. There was an email list he mentioned, people involved with the Chinese internal arts that he communicated with. I wasn’t really paying much attention, but I think he was getting information about the seminars there.”

“Any chance you know the name of this list?”

“No. But I can find out. I’m pretty sure Clay used his work computer for at least some extracurricular stuff. I can have one of our IT people check his email archives.” He paused for a moment. “I’m assuming this means you’ll take the job.”

“I’m thinking about it. Before we go any further, let’s talk about billing.”

“I have no frame of reference for this. What’s the typical charge to locate a missing person?”

“There’s no typical charge because there’s no typical missing person. My base fee is two hundred dollars an hour. That’s the starting point. I’ll also look at things like Clay’s salary and bonus package, your personal net worth, NanoGene’s valuation, that sort of thing.

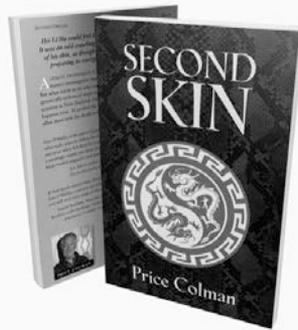
“Meanwhile, assuming I take the job, I bill you for all reasonable expenses. I’m not going to give you an estimate because I don’t know how complicated this could get. Should I take the job, I’ll keep you updated on progress and billable hours. We start with you paying me a \$10,000 retainer. That money can go for initial expenses. If there’s any left over, it goes toward the final invoice, should I find Clay quickly and easily.”

Thorson pondered this for a moment. “When can you let me know if you’re taking the job?”

“Twenty-four hours.”

Once we’d swapped contact info and signed off, I sat there in the sunlit room, looking out over town, absentmindedly scratching Rourke’s ears. He didn’t seem to care what I was thinking about as long as my fingers were busy on his head.

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